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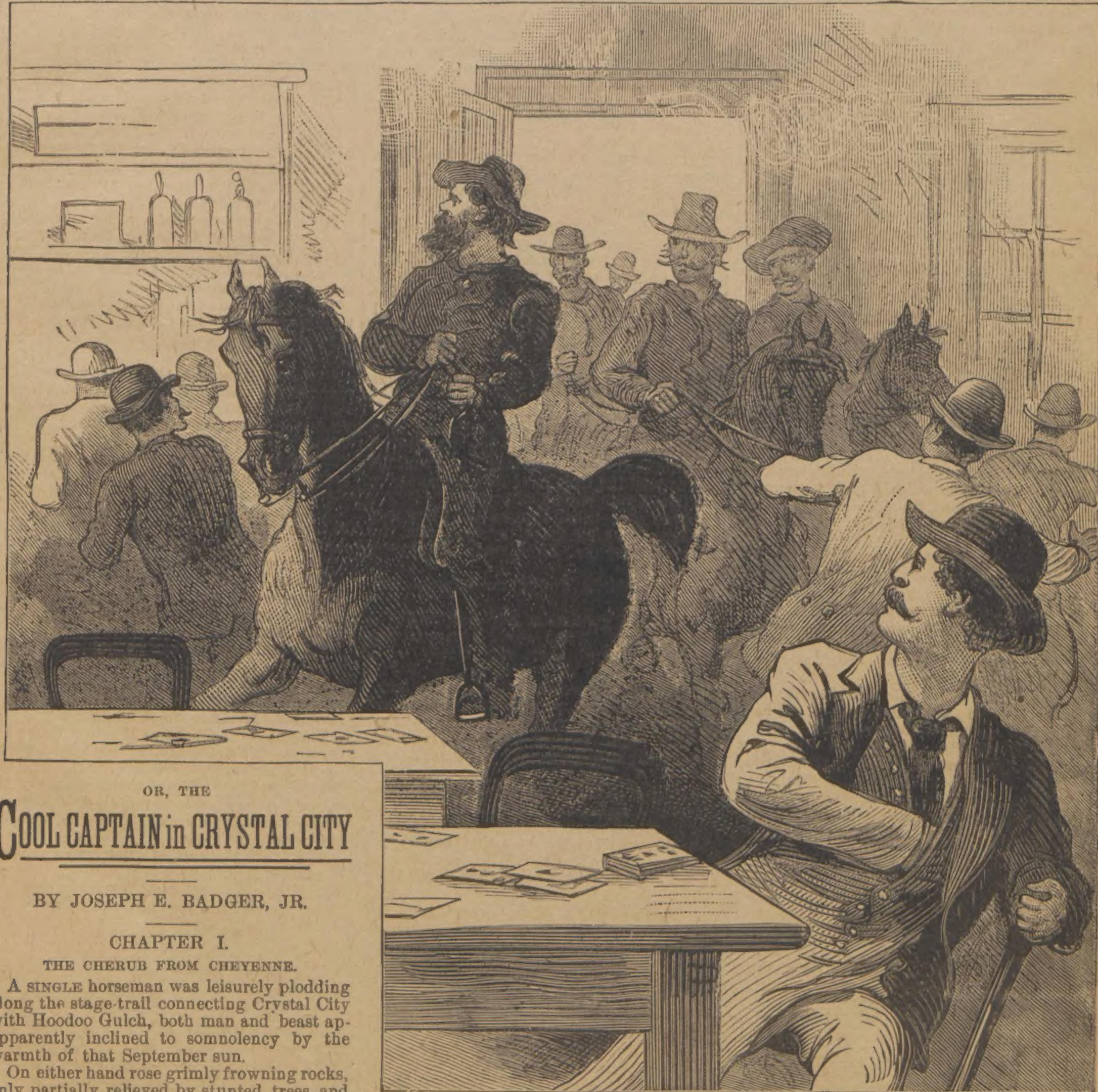
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Curly Kid, the Cheyenne Spur;



OR, THE COOL CAPTAIN in CRYSTAL CITY

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

THE CHERUB FROM CHEYENNE.

A SINGLE horseman was leisurely plodding along the stage-trail connecting Crystal City with Hoodoo Gulch, both man and beast apparently inclined to somnolency by the warmth of that September sun.

On either hand rose grimly frowning rocks, only partially relieved by stunted trees and scrubby bushes, powdered over with the red dust which seemed omnipresent.

MORE SWIFTLY ACTED THE CHERUB FROM CHEYENNE, FOR, PUSHING BACK HIS CHAIR, HE SLIPPED HIS HAND INSIDE HIS VEST WHERE HUNG A REVOLVER.

Left to its own guidance by a lazy rider, the gray gelding plodded on after a painfully monotonous fashion until a certain point in that trail was reached, then came a sudden change.

Up rose head and tail, the latter switching nervously, the former turning swiftly to the right, with quivering nostrils that caught the scent coming from yonder tree-masked defile.

"Steady, boy! What's the matter with—Ah!"

A shrill neigh burst from the gray gelding, plainly in challenge to others of its own race, and with a sharp ejaculation the now thoroughly aroused traveler faced in that same direction with hands dropping back to his weapons.

His keen eyes flashed over the covert, but failed to detect aught to confirm those ugly suspicions; but an instant later there came the harsh command:

"Hands up, or chew lead, pardner!"

Swift as thought itself those hands gripped guns and jerked them free of scabbards; but, ere they could do more, a snaky coil shot out from the bushes on the opposite side of the road, and, as the greasy noose fell fairly over head and shoulders, a vicious jerk tore the traveler out of his saddle, bringing him to earth with stunning force.

A single shot woke the echoes, but the bullet sped aimlessly up the rocky slope, and then half a dozen active shapes broke forth to fairly cover that struggling stranger.

"Don't croak him unless it's to save a better man!" added the voice of the challenger. "Pull his teeth and clip his wings! Lively, now, for there's no time to waste!"

While speaking he was acting, for his were the strong hands which caught and restrained the frightened gelding, forcing it out of the road and through the bushes which masked the mouth of the defile.

By this same route was conveyed the prisoner, now rapidly recovering from that ugly fall, but finding himself helpless to fight or to flee, thanks to the bonds which had so hurriedly been placed upon his limbs.

Following the pass only a few rods from the stage-trail, the leader turned the gray horse over to one of his men, then made another sign which was promptly obeyed by his fellows.

The prisoner was placed with back supported by a dead tree, his captors falling back until he was the center of a grimly silent circle.

Into this circle now stepped the chief, garbed in black from crown to sole, standing motionless as an ebony statue, but with eyes that shone luridly through the twin apertures in his sable mask.

The prisoner winked and blinked rapidly to free his eyes of dust, then took a leisurely survey of his immediate surroundings, after which he fairly faced the chief, coolly saying:

"It's your say-so, stranger. You've caught your goose; now, how are you going to serve it up?"

"Who and what are you, first?"

"Age before beauty, always, so who in time are you?"

"Your master, just now. Don't make me your executioner, as well."

The prisoner shook his bound arms, then glanced down at the stout thongs which held his ankles together, before replying:

"You're safe in talking that way, just now, stranger, but if you'll give me time to shake off these hobbles, I'll not only call you liar but prove you one as well!"

A gloved hand jerked out a revolver and thrust its grim muzzle fairly into the face of the prisoner, the pointed hammer slowly rising under the pressure of that forefinger.

A sneering smile curled the captive's lips as he gazed unflinchingly into those glittering eyes while uttering:

"Shoot, and so prove yourself coward as well as liar!"

For a few seconds life hung by a single hair; then the pistol was shifted, and its owner curtly spoke:

"You're playing the fool, if not the cur, pardner. It's bad enough to play spy, without—"

"That's another wild shot to help spoil your record, stranger. I'm not playing spy, just at present, and if it's holding up the hearse—"

"Steady, you!"

"Steady goes! As I was saying, if you'd come at me the right way, I'm not so mighty certain I wouldn't chip in as a helper rather than a hindrance. But now—well, what comes next?"

"Who and what are you, anyway?"

"Half white and free born."

"Business! Show up, or lie down—for keeps!"

Almost viciously came the words and with them again the muzzle of that revolver; but the prisoner merely laughed carelessly as he looked into the grooved bore, then said:

"I cut my teeth on a better gun, pardner, before I knew how to walk, and I'm too old now to fly the track at a bare show-down. If you really mean it, why don't you shoot? Time is money, and—"

"Who are you, anyway?" repeated the masked chief, his tones an odd mixture of curiosity, rage and admiration. "What's your name when you're at home?"

"I'm at home anywhere and everywhere save in a pulpit or on a gallows; but, as for the rest, I'm Curly Kid, the Cherub from Cheyenne. And you don't want to make any further mistake, stranger; I'm not one of a litter, but I was born on purpose!"

Half-reluctantly that weapon was lowered, and there came a low muttering from that grim circle as an involuntary tribute to the audacious nerve displayed by this Unknown.

Villains though they might be, evidently those masked outcasts could appreciate courage and nerve when they found it.

"That's my pedigree, boiled down for just such an occasion as this appears to be," added the prisoner, leaning easily back against that supporting tree-trunk, gently nodding his head to keep time with his tongue while leisurely scanning such of the road-agents as stood fairly within his limited range of vision.

"If that isn't elaborate enough, I can give you more. I'm not at all ashamed of my past record, and if I don't keep the pages to come just as clean and bright, then I've got to meet up with mighty sight better men than have come in my way up to date.

"I'm Curly Kid Cummings, as I told you before, and on top of that I'm a thoroughbred sport from the word go! I'm good as they make 'em, if I do say it myself; and if any gentleman amongst ye doubts that, just turn me loose and begin saying your prayers!"

An impatient gesture by the chief cut his boastful speech short.

"Talk is cheap, but—"

"I've got the money it takes to buy whisky, too," interjected Curly Kid, in no wise abashed. "I can talk, but I can act just as well if I only have half a chance."

"That's your say-so, of course."

"Why not? Shall I prove it? Then turn me loose, give me back my tools, and if I don't hold my end level when the hearse comes—"

"I knew it! You're an infernal spy, and—"

"You're a gentleman, and that makes us even in lying! What would I want to play spy for? Where's there any money in it, pray?"

"Spy or informer, what's the odds? Your nag scented us out, and then we had to take you in or fare worse, in the end!"

"And now you've got me, you don't know what to do with me? Is that the way of it?"

The road-agent chief gave a chuckle as he tapped the butt of a revolver with forefinger, then said:

"Oh, that's easy enough; never you worry, pardner! We'll just put you to sleep, and play like you never have been; see?"

"That's foolish, man, dear," came the cool retort. "By doing that, you'd be throwing away the best tool you ever had offered. If you still doubt, why not give me a show? Say the word, and I'll hold up the hearse by my lonesome. I'll run the whole job—"

"Clean into the ground, and then break it short off!" interrupted the outlaw. "You play it mighty well, stranger, but we cut our eye-teeth long before you came upon the stage."

"You're not the manner of game we're

after, and it's a stroke of your bad luck that you happened along, just as you did."

"If you had no real use for me, why take so much trouble to rake me in, then?" half-petulantly demanded Curly Kid. "Why not have held your peace and let me go my way?"

"To warn the stage that we were in waiting, of course!"

"How could I, when I never knew—"

"Bah! Your nag scented us out, and the moment he whickered you couldn't help knowing what was in the wind. If we had let you pass, our hopes of boodle would have gone glimmering as well!"

The masked chief turned away as though he felt enough had been spoken, then flung up his right hand with a sharp hiss as he bent head in keener listening.

From some unseen point there issued a peculiar signal, which was readily interpreted by the road-agents, for each member instinctively looked to his weapons, even before their leader could pronounce the words:

"Steady, lads! that's for solid business. Look to this fellow, some of you!"

Curly Kid had caught that signal as well, and found slight difficulty in comprehending its full meaning. Although little better than a stranger within the gates, he knew it must be about time for the daily stage between Hoodoo Gulch and Crystal City, and the rest was easily guessed.

The leader of the footpads made a gesture which sent several of his men to the side of the prisoner; but, before they could do more than fasten grip upon the Cherub, he again broke forth:

"Better grip your good chance when it offers, pardner! Better turn me loose in the pit with both gaffs on, then play spectator while I turn the trick your way; for I'm Curly Kid, the Cherub from—"

"Cork him up, will you?" cried the chief, with an angry gesture. "Go through his clothes for all he's got; then hustle him back out of sight and hearing. Business, now!"

"Oh, now, I say!"

A clumsy paw reached for those protesting lips; but, hampered though he was, Curly Kid still possessed the power of motion, and, jerking his head swiftly to one side, he foiled that effort, hastily adding:

"Don't brand yourself fool as well as knave, stranger! I'm making you an offer that never comes twice to the same man, and—"

"Will nothing but this satisfy you?" demanded the irate road-agent, stepping closer and partly lifting his revolver. "Swallow your tongue or lose your roof: which shall it be?"

"Neither. And I'm talking more for your good than my own benefit. It's last call; better make me a friend than an enemy!"

With those words went a change of tone, but the masked leader paid no attention to that sudden earnestness, unless it was by more plainly betraying his own anger.

Lifting his left hand he struck Cummings sharply across the lips, driving that curly-crowned head back against the rough bark of the blasted tree, then ordering:

"Hustle him out of the way, lads! And if he chins too loud, or even tries to cut up rusty, slit his throat and make an end of it!"

Strong hands fastened upon the bound man, but there was no resistance, now.

That face was pale as death. Those big brown eyes had turned red with fire kindled by that dastardly stroke, and if there had been more time for taking note of things, the captain of road-agents might well have regretted doing so much, since he was not ready to do still more.

The ruffians hustled their charge away from that spot, taking him further from the road, in company with the gray gelding, from whose back he had been torn by that deftly handled lasso.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN CLEAN-UP ON DECK.

MEANWHILE, the daily stage running from Hoodoo Gulch to Crystal City was keeping schedule time under the guidance of Jimmy Bright, and, oddly enough, the "insides" were busily discussing the road-agent question together.

The stage was "running light" on that trip, so far as numbers were concerned; but, what the freight lacked in quantity was more than made up for by quality, as Jimmy Bright would have averred.

Prominent among the four inside passengers was he who spoke most positively, Nathan Manning by name, junior partner in the enterprising firm of Waller & Manning, bankers and brokers with headquarters at Crystal City.

A man of weight was this Nathan Manning, in more senses than one; a shrewd manipulator of mining-stocks and bonds; a daring speculator both at home and far abroad; more of the wolf than the lamb so far as keeping on the safe side of the market was concerned, yet so far keeping his business record clean and unsullied.

Tall and portly he was, still handsome, after a large and massive fashion, though looking rather more than less his two score years, thanks to the sprinkling of frost upon his head and through his almost patriarchal beard.

The razor had left his upper lip and a portion of each cheek bare, and it may be that this rather old-fashioned manner of barbering helped add to his seeming age; but there certainly was no lack of fire in those keen brown eyes, no loss of energy in either tones or actions.

"That is all right, gentlemen," the banker was saying, each word sounding sharp and clean-cut. "Every man is entitled to his own opinion, and this is mine; I firmly believe that Martin Castle is at bottom of all this road-agenting business!"

"I don't, then!" stubbornly asserted Paul Gordon, a grizzly-haired veteran of the silver regions. "You can't prove it, nuther!"

"That's what!" grunted a third member. "An' ef I couldn't prove, I just wouldn't say—so that!"

"There's moral proof as well as legal, gentlemen," retorted the banker, his full lip curling briefly. "A man may feel convinced he is right, yet not be able to prove his suspicions in court."

"Then he'd better keep 'em to himself than go flingin' of 'em around so durn keeless, like," bluntly retorted Gordon, with a vigorous nod of his frosty pow.

"Which it'd be mighty sight safer, too!" added his echo. "I'd kind o' hate to tell Mart Castle he was Cap'n Clean-up—blamed ef I jest wouldn't, now!"

The banker smiled sardonically, as his brown eyes flashed from face to face, then he spoke in his turn:

"I am not making the accusation, just at present, gentlemen; but when the proper time comes 'round, you can be sure I'll perform my duty without fear or favor. And, meanwhile, let me give you a hint of two, please:

"Is it a mere coincidence that Martin Castle can never prove an *alibi* when this Captain Clean-up does a stroke of work? Is it nothing more than an awkward chance that Castle has never formed one of a party held up by this villain?"

"I'm another, thar, an' you don't call me him, do ye?" bluntly demanded Paul Gordon.

"Of course not! But, you have been able to show where you were at the time those bold outrages have been committed. How about Castle?"

There was silence, though hardly of conviction; then Manning added:

"This stage has been held up on three separate occasions, each one being a complete success, from Captain Clean-up's point of view. His surprises have been so complete that armed resistance has been out of the question, and each time he has struck an unusually rich freight.

"Can all that be called mere luck, gentlemen? Does it not prove that Captain Clean-up has his own way of keeping posted as to our affairs?"

"Mebbe so; but, that don't go to prove Mart Castle is the p'izen critter, an' glib as yer tongue runs on right now, Mr. Manning, you don't dast fer to call the lad ary sech to his own face!"

Paul Gordon drew his gaunt figure erect as he spoke, plainly ready to back up his words by actions if put to the test; but, before Nathan Manning could reply, there

came a truly startling interruption from without.

"Hands up! Down brakes or croak, Jimmy Bright!"

Sharp and menacing came that challenge, and like one who ever held himself in readiness to meet just such an emergency, the veteran on the box kicked over the crutch and flung his weight upon the beam, at the same time shortening the ribbons with a vigor which cast both wheelers and leaders upon their haunches.

"Don't shoot, fer up goes the hull durn outfit!" fairly squealed the driver, throwing aloft the grimy paws which still clung to the reins.

That sudden stoppage flung all inside into utter confusion, piling the passengers on top of each other, and thus rendering instant arming out of the question.

And before they could fairly disentangle themselves, another stern warning came from the outer air:

"Careful, inside! Pull a gun or make a kick and we'll turn that hearse into a sieve! Play white and your lives are sacred; play fools, and you're good as cold meat already!"

An instant's pause, then came the further order:

"Ready, men! Keep 'em covered, and if you have to shoot, shoot to kill!"

Manning was one of the first to recover from that mixing-up process, but he took no more than a fleeting look out at window before hastily crying to his fellow passengers:

"Too late, men! They've got us foul, and too late for fighting!"

"But not too late for croaking if you really want it that way, my pretty fellows!" came the mocking tones of Captain Clean-up at one of the lowered windows.

A brace of business-like pistols showed first at that opening, then over the leveled tubes gleamed a pair of lustrous eyes—the sole feature visible, thanks to that sable disguise, just then.

The bold road-agent laughed aloud as he saw that instinctive shrinking away from his weapons, and moving the muzzles sufficiently to cover each exposed face in turn, he lightly added:

"Luckily for you all, gentlemen, I'm not in a bloodthirsty mood this charming afternoon. Give me your gold, and I care not for your gore. Only, business goes, and I'm its prophet! Pile out o' that, and pay forfeit for trying to run the gate without first paying toll!"

"Wish't was me goin' to your hangin', dug-gun ye!" surly growled old Gordon, as a revolver muzzle almost rubbed up against his nose.

"Button that lip of yours, old growler, else you'll hardly live long enough to enjoy your own funeral, let 'alone mine," came the ready retort through the window.

Stepping back a pace or two, Captain Clean-up gave place to one of his men, who opened the stage door at a nod from his chief.

"Tumble out of that, please, gentlemen!" summoned the road-agent in a tone of grim impatience. "Climb out, and line up!"

Paul Gordon was the first passenger to emerge from the coach, and, as his feet fairly touched earth, he turned a keen, searching look upon that most prominent figure, like one striving hard to read what might lie back of that sable covering.

The more than suspicions expressed by Nathan Manning were still fresh in his mind; and though he could not think Martin Castle would play such an evil part, there was something in the tones of that masked outlaw which caused him no little uneasiness.

And, something in that honest face seemed to annoy or to frighten the road-agent chief, for he visibly flinched from that gaze, and his voice sounded a bit less peremptory as he exclaimed, a moment later:

"Well, what's the matter with you, Gordon? Fall back, there! Line him up, boys! And empty that hearse, I say!"

Gordon fell back, of his own accord, even before those hands closed upon his person, his ruddy cheeks looking even paler than they had while that cocked revolver was staring him full in the face.

For now, more than ever, that voice sounded familiar to his ears!

Captain Clean-up turned away, to cover the second passenger who came forth, but he caused less delay, meekly shuffling over to where Paul Gordon had been lined up, taking place beside the veteran, evidently feeling it bad enough to lose his property without losing his life.

After him came the third passenger, who, like Gordon, seemed disagreeably affected by the voice of the head outlaw.

Before this hold-up he had scouted the bare idea of Martin Castle being Captain Clean-up, but now—whose voice was that? And those eyes were strangely like—were they, though?

The road raider betrayed anger at that too close inspection, and he rudely swept his pistol-muzzle across the man's face, as he spoke:

"Don't you try to be too mighty smart, my man! Rack over yonder and line up! When a fellow like you falls to dreaming wild dreams, it's high time he was coming in out of the wet!"

Cowed, the passenger fell back, taking his place by the side of his fellow unfortunates, the trio holding up their hands with open palms, covered by several loaded Winchesters in the hands of masked agents.

This left Nathan Manning inside the stage, and, once more turning eyes that way, Captain Clean-up spoke, with stern emphasis:

"Tumble out of that, you big lump of usury! Are you so used to cheating that you're thinking to defraud the toll-takers, Nath. Manning?"

No answer came from the interior, and, with a half-smothered oath, Captain Clean-up stepped closer to the open door, holding his revolvers ready for use in case of need.

He saw the banker seated as before, but with folded arms across his ample bosom, his lips firmly compressed like one whose resolve has been fully taken.

"Ah, there you are!" ejaculated the road brigand, with an echo of relief in his tones. "I began to fear you'd crawled into your hole, then pulled it in after you! Now, will you tumble out of that, or must I help you, with these pretty tools?"

His weapons came to the front after a decidedly significant fashion just then, but the banker hardly stirred on his cushioned seat.

A surly growl came from those firm lips; then followed the words:

"A man must be an infernal fool who assists at his own robbery, and whatever else I may be, I'm hardly that!"

"More knave than fool, for a scandalous fact!" declared Captain Clean-up, with a short chuckle.

"Your tongue is no scandal."

"That's all right, Mr. Manning, if you only think so. But, this is pure business, and so—will you tumble out of that?"

"I'll not help, if I can't hinder," doggedly repeated the banker, though he did flinch a trifle as one of those guns moved still closer to his face. "You've got me foul, again, and I can't fight you as I'd like, but, I'll never help in my own robbery!"

"Is it a proof of greater wisdom to aid in bringing about your own funeral, Mr. Manning?" sarcastically demanded the road rustler.

"You'd never dare—"

"Easy, my dear fellow! I'd rather steal a sheep than take a dare, and so, last call! Will you climb out of that on your own feet, or shall I assist you?"

A brief silence; then came the additional warning and threat:

"Enough chin-music, Nathan Manning! I've never been your lover, and now that I've got you foul, don't rub the temptation in too mighty deep!"

"Who are you, sir? If you mean—"

"I mean to be obeyed, or to know the reason why. Now, you climb out of that hearse before I can count six, or I'll lift your roof so mighty high you'll have to climb the golden stairs to get it back again!"

Flippantly though the words may sound, there was little room left for doubting the perfect sincerity of Captain Clean-up in making this threat; and, evidently, Nathan Manning so believed, for he abandoned his hopeless position, stooping his head as he moved awkwardly to the open door before

which the road wolf was now standing, revolver in hand.

Those fatal numerals were rolling over those hidden lips in grim haste, just as though the speaker was beginning to thirst for the life so nearly forfeited, and this may account for what followed—in part at least.

Nathan Manning made a false step as he left the stage, and, stumbling, he cast out his hands like one trying to keep his balance. He fell against the road-agent, and, as Captain Clean-up staggered back, the mask was torn from over his face, laying his features completely bare.

One glance; then there came a sharp cry from the other passengers:

"Martin Castle, by the Eternal!"

CHAPTER III.

WHO IS CAPTAIN CLEAN-UP?

So sudden and so forcible was that collision that the road-agent was turned half-way round, thus fairly exposing his unmasked face to the startled gaze of the inside passengers, when from the lips of one of their number came that involuntary cry of recognition.

Even then Captain Clean-up seemed too completely cast off his balance to remedy the slip, and it was only when a warning cry came from one of his men that he appeared to notice just what had happened to his disguise.

"Keerful, boss!" the fellow cried, as he sprung forward with ready hand to slouch the broad-leaved hat over that exposed visage. "Thar's eyes too durn sharp for—"

With a savage execration, Captain Clean-up flung the fellow aside, at the same instant jerking up his armed right hand and firing a shot, as it seemed, point-blank into the face of the banker, sending him to earth all in a heap.

"Take that, you clumsy hound!" he viciously cried, voice blending with the sharp explosion of powder. "And you—steady, all! Who wants the next pill?"

He wheeled around to cover the three prisoners with his guns, looking only too willing to add other victims to his bloody score.

That swift movement caused the limp hat-brim to fly up and back once more, and for the second time Paul Gordon gave a half-choked cry of mingled anger, pain and doubt; for, surely, this was the face of the young man whom he had been so stubbornly defending against suspicion?

Once more the road ruffian interfered, springing hastily to the side of his leader and letting fall another word of warning.

With a quick gesture Captain Clean-up slouched his hat, then turned his back upon the startled passengers as he harshly added:

"Hold 'em level, lads! If either one makes a false move, blow him through if he's the last man on earth!"

He snatched the mask from the hand of his henchman, covering his face with it and holding the cloth while the broken strings were knotted back of his head once more.

Through all this excitement the lesser ruffians had acted with admirable coolness, not one seeming to lose his head, as might well have happened with less seasoned timber.

Those detailed to guard the "lined up" victims kept their position and held their fire, while still keeping their human game closely covered with their loaded Winchesters.

Only the one fellow sprung to help or to hinder, and he was the only person who now seemed to take note of the fallen banker.

Nathan Manning was stirring, now, lifting hand and head, his face showing almost ghastly pallor in spite of the red dust which had come to it in that sudden tumble.

"Don't—don't shoot!" he cried in husky tones, his fluttering hand adding to that appeal for mercy. "I never—Don't shoot!"

He shrunk visibly as Captain Clean-up once again caught the drop, for there was a fierce menace underlying those mocking words:

"Still on deck, you clumsy hound? I thought you were half-way to Tophet by this time, but—steady! You're trembling so mighty much that my single bullet will make a pattern like a pint of buckshot!"

"Don't shoot. I've got enough," surlily muttered the banker, yet not daring to take any more positive action while that ugly weapon kept him so closely covered. "Twas all an accident, and I never—"

"Get up, you yowler!" harshly cut in the road-agent leader, lowering his muzzle a bit, yet holding the weapon ready for use if called upon. "I've wasted too much time over you already. Get up, I say!"

Manning obeyed, brushing a sleeve across his face to the better free his eyes from dust, fearing to reach for his kerchief lest Captain Clean-up think he was after a weapon.

"Line up, there!" added the masked chief, with gesture to match his words. "Line up, and behave yourself better, or you'll be worth only what you'd fetch as soap-grease at a cent a pound!"

The banker fell into place at one end of the brief line, and as the head knave turned aside to mutter a few words to his *aide*, Paul Gordon huskily mumbled at his ear:

"Bad enough, but mought 'a' bin wuss! When I see ye go down all in a heap, like—ugh! How'd ye miss ketchin' the lead, though?"

"I don't know, myself," was the answer, in similar tones, the speaker shivering as they came. "I saw his gun, and so—I threw myself, I reckon, though I can't—Don't talk, man alive!"

Again the banker shivered violently, seemingly wholly unmanned by that narrow escape from instant death.

Before aught more could be spoken by the victims of the hold-up, Captain Clean-up once more asserted his authority, sternly commanding silence, then bidding his fellow fall to work.

"Steady, now! You'd ought to know just what that means, gentlemen," the road-agent added, with a return to his former grim irony. "Just imagine you're in church with all doors closed and the deacon coming with his contribution-box! Now—chip in liberally, my fellow sinners!"

The brisk moving fellow who had sprung to replace that removed mask, once more pushed to the front, chuckling audibly as he adjusted a stout sack so that it hung by a broad strap over his shoulders and in front of his breast.

"Ready, gents, fer hyar I come; 'button-box wide open an' paws jest a-etchin' fer to tetch the dingbats! Ole Marster loves a cheerful giver, 'cordin' to the Good Book, an' we'm ditto to ditto! So shell out yer filthy lucre, gents!"

With insolent gayety the fellow rattled off these sentences; then he paused in front of Manning, with a warning flourish of his grimy paws.

"Keep them duke's o' yours elevated, ef ye please, ole pussy-in-front," he enjoined, just a bit sharply as the banker showed signs of lowering his hands.

"How can I empty my pockets—"

"When you're so much better used to fillin' of 'em out o' somebody else's, hey?" interrupted the knave. "That's all right, my high-an'-lofty covey, so don't you worry. I was jest spittin' out a bit o' poetry, like; talkin' figgertively, to help keep up your sperrits; fer I know tricks too monstrous well to let ye shet paws over ary dime or dollar I've got any intrust into—yes I do, now!"

"Your fame has spread even into our strictly select circles, you see, Nathan," scoffed the head outlaw, but clearly taking no ordinary degree of interest in the result of that initiatory rifling. "It's something like hawk plucking buzzard, I'll admit, but—pure quill, or merely a decoy package, mate?"

Free to make use of both hands the road-agent cut very little time to waste in "going through" this, his first victim of the day; and those words burst from the lips of Captain Clean-up almost involuntarily as he saw his henchman bring to light a fat package which certainly looked like bank-notes.

The searcher partially broke the neatly fastened band of paper, his dirty fingers ruffling the ends of the notes as he chuckled in high glee at the sight.

"The long green, boss, an' plenty of it, too! Ef she hain't—durn ye, critter!" lifting a tightly clinched fist to shake it in front of the banker's face as that suspicion struck

him forcibly. "Ef this is bogus—say she hain't, or off comes yer blessed ruff!"

"I wish it was counterfeit, now!" surlily muttered Manning. "I wish I had never curse you all! If I don't play even with you for all this, Martin Castle—"

"With whom?" sharply interrupted Captain Clean-up as that valuable package vanished into the mouth of the money-bag. "Who is Martin Castle, I'd like to know?"

"You are, and I knew it from the very start! Can you deny that—"

"I do deny it, sir!" cut in the brigand, at the same time making a gesture which bade his fellow go on with his work. "Why you should take such a foolish fancy into your head clean passes my comprehension!"

"It's truth, not fancy, you scoundrel!" passionately persisted the banker, like one fairly beside himself with rage and resentment. "I recognized your figure, your voice, your motions, even before—Hal" as he turned part way toward his companions in misfortune, to add in swift words: "You saw it as well, gentlemen! You can swear to his face, and—isn't this Martin Castle, then?"

Instead of the prompt confirmation which Nathan clearly expected, there was silence; neither one of the three made reply, and even doughty old Paul let his lids droop before those eager looks.

Captain Clean-up gave a mocking laugh, and the banker seemed stung to still greater recklessness.

"Cowards! Bite your tongues and swallow the truth! Ye know you all saw what I did! You know this mask hides the face of Martin Castle, the high-toned Sport of Crystal City! You know—and you know it, too, Captain Clean-up! You are Martin Castle!"

Manning paused, more for lack of breath than because his fierce passions were sated.

Apparently he had forgotten his own perilous situation, or that his very life hung on the finger-tips of yonder silent, black-hooded shapes, who merely awaited word or sign from their master before ending that forfeited life.

But, Captain Clean-up did not seem in such a sanguinary mood, just now; and, after another chuckle, he put up the revolver he had held through all, speaking mildly:

"Maybe I'd ought to make the most of your truly absurd mistake, Mr. Manning, but somehow I can't make it come out, just right. For one thing, I've sins enough of my own to answer for, without assuming those of another fellow, be that fellow better or worse."

"You can't deny it, sir! You are Martin Castle!"

"And you'd almost make Bible oath to that effect, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would; didn't I see your face?"

"Well, I suppose I'd ought to let it go at that, only, bad as I may be, I've never yet hidden myself behind the back of another man! And so I say it all over: you're 'way off your base, old fellow! I'm not the person you take me for."

"I saw your face, Martin Castle! It was pure accident, but still there must have been a fate in it all! I saw your face when your mask came off, and these men—speak up, fellows! You did see, as well as I saw! You can swear to this man, if you only will!"

Still silence was the only answer from that quarter, and Captain Clean-up laughed afresh as he witnessed that foiled hope.

"Oh, come, now, old fellow!" he said, in affected pity, one gloved hand going forth to gently pat the arm of the banker as he added: "The facts of the case run like this: you were even worse upset than I was, and instead of seeing what really was, fright turned your peepers cross-ways until you saw everything reversed!"

"I saw what I did see," doggedly insisted the banker. "I can swear to your face. I can swear before the highest court in all the land that back of yon' mask lies the face of Martin Castle!"

Captain Clean-up stepped back a pace, as though to keep his mask beyond easy reach of that fiercely gesticulating hand.

There was a brief silence, then he slowly spoke again:

"Granting that you saw aright, Mr. Manning, you're a rare fool for saying so much. If I was actually the being you only imagine: if I was realy Martin Castle, what action would I be most apt to take?"

"I saw your face, I tell you!" muttered the banker, still stubborn, yet flinching involuntarily from those glittering eyes, from that smooth, cold, deadly tone.

"I'd be sealing your dangerous tongue by fitting your body for a coffin!" added the chief, answering his own question.

Nathan Manning rallied instead of further flinching, and with a surly boldness he spoke out:

"You might still my tongue, sir, but you can't afford to murder us all! That would be too much, even for the likes of Captain Clean-up!"

Instead of betraying fresh anger at this defiance, the road-agent seemed grimly pleased, to judge by his altered tones alone.

"That's all true enough, Mr. Manning. Four subjects for the coroner, all in a heap, would be crowding the mourners, and so—you still insist that I am the fellow you call Martin Castle, then?"

"Now I've said so much, I'll stick by the truth, no matter what it may cost me," retorted the banker, bracing up for the final test. "Yes, I persist in saying you are Martin Castle. If you are not the Crystal City Sport, prove it by showing your face!"

"All right, my covey!" with a short, reckless laugh as his right hand went up to his mask. "This is my last trick, and I'll be far enough away from here to laugh at justice. So, look your fill, my dear sir!"

CHAPTER IV.

A GARRULOUS TOLL-TAKER.

At those real or affectedly careless words, Captain Clean-up jerked away the black mask which had covered his face, standing squarely in front of the expectant banker the while.

That same motion pushed back the broad leaf of his felt hat, thus leaving his face entirely without shield; but—

A face so curiously distorted, a face with each and every feature so oddly twisted out of natural shape that they no longer resembled aught human, save in the laughing, mocking devil gleaming forth from those two bright eyes!

All this was so ludicrously different from what Nathan Manning had looked for as he saw that sable covering coming away, that he stood like one petrified by amazement.

Then he gave a cry so full of anger and wonder, that the road brigand laughed outright; and in so doing forgot the role he had set for himself, if only for an instant!

Relaxed by mirth those strained muscles failed to maintain that living mask, and for the space of a single breath the road-agent's real face became visible!

Another cry broke from the banker's lips, this time one of exultation, and with leveled finger he pointed toward that face, at the same time calling upon his fellow passengers:

"Look, men! See for yourselves how surely— Ah!"

Just as swiftly Captain Clean-up resumed his disguise, his features still more wildly distorted if that was possible!

"You, Bill!" came croakingly from his twisted lips as he grimaced fantastically before those wondering eyes. "Bear ye full witness unto— Bah!" cutting himself short as he deftly replaced the black cloth once more.

Both tone and manner underwent a complete change, now, and there was a thinly masked threat underlying the words which followed:

"Are you satisfied, now, Nathan Manning? Have I humored your foolish fancies sufficiently for one round?"

"I am satisfied, yes," muttered the banker, in turn.

Captain Clean up laughed lightly at that, seemingly finding a peculiar sort of amusement in baiting the portly representative of Crystal City's banking interests.

"That sounds like it, I don't think! And yet, surely you ought to be satisfied, for you've had enough for a hog! And I—well, it's a grand proof of my rare good nature that I've humored you thus far, Nathan!"

Manning shifted uneasily on his feet, for there was a silky softness in those tones which might well have alarmed even a bolder man.

"You are satisfied, then, my dear fellow?" purringly persisted the road-agent. "You have gotten well rid of that ridiculous hallucination? You are content to take me for just what I am: Captain Clean-up, the Gentleman Toll-taker?"

Still no reply from those tightly compressed lips, and after gazing for a brief space into those shifting eyes, the outlaw waved a gloved hand toward his henchman with the money-sack.

"Never wholly neglect business for mere pleasure, pardner! Go on with your toll-taking, and don't exhaust the patience of our very good friends, by keeping them waiting over-time."

"All right, boss; business goes ef you says it!"

"I do say it, pardner, and I say it mighty loud; do your work, and do it up brown! I may take a notion to follow in your tracks, later, and if I should stumble over a penny that escaped your fingers—"

"Twon't be on the outside o' thar pelts, boss, never you worry over that!" grimly assured the lesser knave as he resumed the briefly suspended robbery.

Nathan Manning had already been stripped of all valuables, even to his jewelry, including a plain gold band ring which was slipped from his finger with no little difficulty.

As the agent passed on to the others, Captain Clean-up stood by, watching the movements of his man, yet using tongue almost as steadily as he did his eyes.

"I don't ask you to give me more credit than belongs to me, friend Manning," he said. "I wasn't always so thoughtful for the fancies of the gentry I met up with in the course of business. Time was when I'd have answered you back with a deftly placed bit of lead; for it's very seldom that I have to pull trigger twice for one bit of game, human or otherwise!"

Manning shivered at this cool allusion to the shot which he had so narrowly escaped, but a few minutes earlier.

Captain Clean-up laughed softly as he noted that perturbation.

"Just then the Old Adam was on deck, and I really meant to pay you in lead for your clumsiness; or—was it a neat scheme to solve your haunting doubts, my dear fellow?"

Smoothly came the query, but Nathan only tightened his lips, for he had at last learned prudence.

This masked villain surely held the power of life or death in his own hands, and only a rank idiot would twice invite the death-shot. Captain Clean-up let the matter drop for the moment, moving a bit nearer as his ally gave another satisfied chuckle, pausing to weigh in his hand the buckskin purse he had taken from the third victim.

"Enough to pay the toll for one, pardner?"

"You bet yer sweet life, boss!"

"An' a pesky sight more'n I kin afford to lose," gloomily muttered the rifled man. "'Twouldn't be so mighty bad, though, ef I could see ary way o' gittin' back at ye—dug-gun ye all, anyway!"

Nathan Manning gave an involuntary start at the speech, but then resumed his former position as he caught the keen gaze of the road-agent chief fastening upon him.

"You were about to speak, Mr. Manning?" softly hinted the outlaw, one gloved hand toying with the pistol at his hip. "You strongly sympathize with our friend—what might be your name, pray, sir?" turning toward the last robbed passenger.

"Dick Brandon, ef you really need the tellin'," surlily answered the miner, with a slight shrug of his broad shoulders.

"You speak as though you thought I'd made your acquaintance before to-day," coolly commented Captain Clean-up. "Can it be possible that you also have a wheel in that good-looking head of yours, Mr. Brandon? That you, likewise, fancy I am the unfortunate Martin Castle?"

"Waal, ef I was to think that way, I wouldn't be durn fool 'nough fer to say so," gruffly answered the passenger, his eyes turning aside to note how much the next man might be losing at those nimble hands.

"There is a model for you, dear Mr. Manning," said the road-agent, turning once more to the banker. "You were less prudent, and yet—I am not one of those who deem a mistake worse than a crime!

"Time was when I would have acted far differently under such peculiar circumstances as these, although I never saw the time when I wouldn't have blushed with shame at the bare idea of hiding behind the back of an innocent if not wholly honest man!

"But now—well, I can afford to don my natural colors, and hence the flat denial I've given you. I am not the person you appear to believe, Mr. Manning, and in hopes of sparing another the annoyance of answering for my deeds, I'm taking all this trouble to convince you.

"Are you convinced, though, sir?"

Nathan Manning flashed a sullen glance into those glittering orbs that marked the sable field of cloth, then said, slowly:

"What good would it do me to talk? If I said I was convinced of my mistake, you wouldn't believe me!"

"Are you such a liar, then, dear fellow?" mocked the outlaw. "Why, man, you're even worse off than I thought you; and that is needless!

"Not believe the bare word of the great and only original Nathan Manning? Banker Manning, who never yet exacted usury from the hard-up wretch who had no other hope of relief! Deacon Manning, the oily, the bland, the suave, the pious—old fraud!"

Those last two words came like a double blow in the face from the hand of a pretty woman, and Nathan Manning shrunk visibly from the speaker, his strong white hands clinching tightly, his lips curling apart from his large and strong teeth.

For an instant or two it really seemed as though fierce rage would send him headlong at the throat of his masked mocker, but Captain Clean-up drew back a pace, at the same time gripping tightly the butt of a revolver, like one who felt he might speedily require some such aid.

A brief silence, then the road-agent spoke in altered tones:

"That's all right, Mr. Manning, and you're hardly fool enough to run your nose up against a loaded gun simply because another gentleman sees fit to crack a jest at your expense."

"It's your turn now, Mar—your turn, sir!", said the banker, quickly correcting himself, but doubtless saying much less than he would have ventured only for that awkward slip of the tongue.

If Captain Clean-up noticed that slip, he let it pass by without correction on his part; possibly he had grown weary of defending the good name of an absent gentleman.

"Yes, it is my turn, Nathan Manning, and I'm happy to find that turn bids fair to be a profitable one. You had—how big a pile, pray?"

"More than I can well afford to lose," moodily muttered Manning.

"Then it is your loss, not the firm's?"

"Mine, of course, though the package was meant for use in the bank. It was in my charge, and I'm responsible for it. You—but that's worse than folly, just now!"

"Granted, dear fellow, yet 'twould be something of a consolation if you were only free to pour forth the curses which fairly scorch your throat, now wouldn't it?" mocked the robber, lightly.

"That day may come 'round; not for empty curses, but for— Bah!"

Manning shrugged his broad shoulders as he cast a meaning glance around over those armed supporters.

"That day will never dawn in this quarter of the globe, my dear fellow! If I thought there was any chance of that coming to pass, I'd never leave so surly a hound as you with a full set of teeth. I'd pull them all out, or else—I'd send you across the Great Divide!"

Just then the fellow detailed to search the passengers, completed his task, and bluntly announced the fact.

"All's cleaned out, boss, an' ef you kin scratch up so much as a red cent from the heap o' them all, I'll eat my ole hat fer a flap-jack!"

"All searched, then?"

"Ax 'em, boss, ef you cain't take my

word fer it!" said the knave, with a chuckling gurgle back of his mask. "Ef I never did a job afore, I done jobbed this one!"

While speaking he held open the mouth of the stout sack for the chief's inspection, but Captain Clean-up made a quick gesture, saying:

"Time enough later on, lad. I've only a word or two more for the benefit of these gentlemen, and for you in particular, Nathan Manning."

"Well, we can't run away from the infliction so long as your fellows hold the drop," coldly retorted the banker, now looking and acting more like his usual self.

"Thank your lucky stars that they have held the drop, instead of making a worse use of it—for you!" significantly said the road-agent. "Men less thoroughly disciplined would hardly have held their fire when you set in to play the ass, Nathan!"

"But that wasn't what I started to say, just now. You have played the fool, here; don't repeat the operation down yonder in Crystal City, or you may come off all the worse! Unless common rumor gives him entirely too much credit for nerve and action, Martin Castle wouldn't ask you twice for an apology in case you take his name in vain again!"

Manning shrugged his shoulders afresh, but made no answer in words. If he had played the fool once, no need to play it again!

"That's about all I've got to say, gentlemen, and that little has been spoken wholly for your own good. It matters not the weight of a single straw to me how or what—The deuce!"

Up to the present moment everything had run along smoothly since the stumble and fall of the banker; but now came an interruption as unexpected as it surely was startling.

Without the slightest preliminary warning a horse and rider came plunging through the bushes and stunted trees which masked the mouth of the defile opening upon the stage road from the right hand, and with a shrill, far-reaching yell that mad rider charged down upon the amazed road-agents, splitting the group wide apart as though it had been a literal thunderbolt.

And yet—strangest fact of all!—that rider was garbed and masked exactly after the fashion set by the chief of road-agents; to all seeming he was one of that very band itself!

"Wake up snakes and hunt your holes!" the mad horseman yelled, as he charged down upon the brigands and their victims.

CHAPTER V.

CURLY KID PLAYS IT ALONE.

It was a non-resisting captive the road-agents fastened upon in obedience to the harsh commands of Captain Clean-up, for that brutal stroke across the lips seemed to have taken all the fight out of Curly Kid Cummings.

He was hustled away through the pass, still further from the stage road, then rudely dumped down in a natural clearing where the robbers had tethered their horses while lying in wait for the Crystal City stage.

Cummings was already bound, hand and foot, though those bonds had been too hurriedly applied to prove very substantial; still, such being the case, those black-masked ruffians apparently thought it useless to spend further time over the prisoner.

They made no attempt to hide their interest in the coming event, and hardly waiting to get rid of their charge, two of their number turned and hurried back to join their fellows in ambush, leaving a single disgruntled knave there on guard duty.

This fellow turned toward Curly Kid with a savage snarl as the bound man made a slight noise in shifting his position for one less uncomfortable.

"Stay put, cuss ye! Gi' me any o' your lip an' I'll blow it clean through the back o' yer neck!"

Curly Kid muttered something about picking a softer stone to rub his ribs upon, but the angry ruffian lifted a foot and swept it across those lips, harshly adding:

"Shet yer trap, or I'll shet it for ye! Stay put, an' keep a-layin' thar, ef ye don't want heap sight wuss fer to ketch ye!"

Turning away, the brutal knave gave his whole attention to what might be going on at the mouth of the defile, using his ears all the more acutely since his eyes were now of little avail.

Thus left to himself Curly Kid cautiously tested his bonds, doing just enough to make sure that he could stretch the imperfect coils far enough to free a hand without serious trouble, then lying motionless as he put his keen wits to work instead.

He made no attempt now to mask his emotions, and his more than comely face revealed something of the fierce resentment he felt for the ruffians who had so rudely treated him since falling into their hands.

"I made him a fair offer, but he wouldn't have it! Instead, he put his dirty brand upon my face—ugh! I'll wipe that out, or lose a leg! But how? How can I stink him the keenest?"

This is only a sample of the thoughts which flashed so swiftly through that busy brain during those few minutes of suspense; but then there rung forth the sharp challenge of the road-agent, and after a brief, confused clatter of hoofs and rattle of wheels, silence reigned.

The agent left to guard Curly Kid gave vent to a muffled ejaculation, neither oath nor laugh, but an odd blending of both. He cast a brief glance toward his apparently helpless charge, then moved a little nearer the scene of interest beyond.

That seemed to be the moment for which Curly Kid was waiting, for he flung all his energies into the task, quickly twisting a hand out of bondage, although the fierce effort tore his skin and bruised his flesh.

With one hand free, the rest was comparatively easy, and in hardly more than one minute from the time his effort began, Cummings cast off the last thong and silently shifted his position for another where he would be hidden from view in case his guard should cast another glance that way.

For a brief space the Cherub stood in doubt as to his next move.

The gray gelding stood only a dozen yards further up the pass, in company with the animals left in waiting by Captain Clean up and his gang.

From the saddle-bow hung the pistols taken from Cummings by those who applied his bonds, and the adventurer knew that he could easily secure these before his careless guards could make any effectual move to halt him by word or by deed. Only—

"If the horses should scare! No, better-like this!"

Curly Kid crouched low enough to close fingers upon a heavy stone which went with him as he stole on tiptoe toward the road-agent.

Not more than a dozen feet remained to be covered in order to bring the ruffian fairly within reach of his rudely armed right hand, but just then the agent turned to look back, giving a short ejaculation as he caught sight of that crouching shape.

Swift as thought itself acted Curly Kid, hurling that heavy stone true as a rifle-shot, and with pretty much the same effect; for the muscular knave fell in his tracks without so much as a cry or a groan!

Almost as swiftly came the Cherub himself, fastening a merciless grip upon the throat of his outwitted guard; but as he felt that significant quiver which alone agitated the road-agent, Cummings relaxed his fingers, at the same time tearing off mask and hat.

Blood was beginning to dampen that thick shock of hair, but after a brief inspection Cummings gave a grunt of relief, muttering to himself:

"Only stunned, which proves that a thick skull is sometimes worth having! Now—the next thing is something else!"

Apparently that "something" was of a whimsical nature, for Curly Kid broke into a subdued but hearty chuckle as he bent low the more silently to glide through the cover intervening between that point and the open stage road.

Pausing at the edge of the bushes the Cherub swiftly took in the scene, just then lively enough, for Nathan Manning made his feigned trip and stumbled, stripping the black covering off the face of Captain Clean up, to go down himself the instant after, seemingly shot through the brain.

At that dastard shot, Curly Kid felt for his own guns and fairly broke cover before he realized his helpless condition; but then he fell back without attracting attention, chuckling again as he saw the banker lift his head and talk, neither action being that of a dead man!

Waiting long enough to get the full run of events, Curly Kid withdrew, hurrying back to where he had left his unconscious guard.

The road-agent was beginning to show signs of recovery, but Curly Kid hardly thought it worth while to waste time in applying either bonds or gag, though he hastily stripped the fellow of his Chinaman-like blouse, slipping it on over his own head, then deftly adding the sable mask previously torn away.

"So-long, pardner!" with a final glance at the now faintly groaning agent, then turning away toward the horses. "If your head's too big for your hat, take a shoe-horn or—steady, boy!"

The gray gelding drew back with a little snort of suspicion at that strange rig, but voice and hand quickly soothed his alarm, and making sure his pistols had come to no harm, but were in serviceable condition, Curly Kid swung himself into the saddle, then cut the reins and hitch-straps of the other horses, grimly laughing as he did so.

"Follow your leader if you like, my lads! I'm going to open the ball with such music—go-way brass band!"

Picking his way to the mouth of the defile, Curly Kid paused at the edge of cover barely long enough to take in the scene beyond, then gave the gray gelding free rein and a brisk touch of the spurs, yelling like a madman as he broke cover and charged down upon the astonished group of robbers and robbers.

As he came his revolver spoke spitefully enough, but his shots flew too high for doing harm, since he wished to scare rather than to slay.

Captain Clean-up was struck by the gray horse and hurled aside in an awkward heap before he could realize just what had broken loose, and then Curly Kid yelled at the top of his voice as he split that gathering widely asunder, bending in the saddle as he came, fastening muscular fingers upon the toll-gatherer and fairly jerking him clear of his footing without so much as slackening the speed of his good horse.

"Come up aloft, Johnny!" the reckless rider cried, by a mighty effort swinging the gasping knave upward and around by the arms until they were back to back, that kicking, struggling shape forming a living shield for his own person as the gray gelding dashed along the road in a rising cloud of dust, its reckless master pealing forth his slogan:

"I'm Curly Kid, the Cherub from Cheyenne! Not one of a litter, but born on purpose!"

Although taken completely by surprise, a few of the road-agents were swift to rally, and the report of firearms added to the echoes, more than one viciously humming bit of lead making itself heard by that reckless horseman.

But then Curly Kid dashed around a bend in the road, passing out of their view, and as the gray horse sped onward, its master shifted that living shield, handling the wiry knave with hardly a seeming effort.

"Stay put, and thank your lucky stars you're not getting a worse dose!" he cried as he swung the road-agent across the pommel, face downward, leaning forward to add a portion of his own weight to the firm pressure of his left hand. "Go easy, or break your fool's neck by taking a dump!"

In that position the luckless fellow was helpless to fight or to hinder, and holding him thus the Cherub rode onward in the direction of Hoodoo Gulch at full speed, casting frequent looks over shoulder and listening for the pursuit which he fully expected.

Men like those would hardly submit to being baffled by a single adversary, and though that disguise might puzzle them for a brief space, the whole truth would soon be gained.

"And then—whoop up for even-off!" the Cherub said, with a brief laugh as he recalled the awkward flight taken by the head road-agent. "He'll break his neck to play even,

but—I gave him fair warning that I'd make a safer friend than enemy!"

For more than a mile that rapid ride continued without halt or break, but then Curly Kid drew rein for a bit, bending his head in acute listening for sign or sound from the road-agents:

His captive groaned and struggled feebly, but that strong hand held him helpless, and after waiting in vain for a few seconds, Cummings once more moved onward.

But now his eyes swept each side of the road instead of turning over shoulder, and after a little while he veered from the beaten track, turning into a little hollow which seemed to lead clear through that rugged range of rocks.

Following this hollow for a few rods, Curly Kid drew rein and slipped out of the saddle, fetching the road-agent with him as he alighted.

"I don't reckon you'll kick against a little halt, pardner?" he asked, mockingly, as the knave was dumped in an almost breathless heap upon the ground. "What's the matter with you, anyway, man, dear?"

That gasping breath was given over to panting curses, and those unnerved hands fumbled blindly for the weapons which Curly Kid deftly put beyond his reach, laughing shortly as he tossed them into the adjacent shrubbery:

"Well, now, I really wouldn't, Johnny! What! pay for your delightful pleasure trip in plumbago and saltpeter, when you've got coin so much more valuable? When you've got—what is it you have got, Johnny, anyway?"

Through all that reckless race the stout money-bag had proved faithful to its trust, for it had been fashioned with an eye to rapid transit and headlong scrambling in case aught should go wrong with the calculations made in advance of a hold-up.

Cutting the strap which supported the bag, Curly Kid speedily put an end to the struggles of his prisoner by flopping him flat on his stomach, then taking a seat between his shoulders.

"You needn't play rocking-horse unless you particularly wish it, my good fellow," coolly quoth the adventurer, maintaining his seat in spite of those vicious efforts to dislodge his weight. "I'm just the easiest man on earth to please, and would as lieve have a stationary—that's a bit more sensible, pardner!"

"I'll kill you ef I ever—"

"Which you never will, so button your lip, Johnny. How can I take account of stock while you are— Quiet, fool!" with abrupt change of tone as a strong hand came down to tightly grip the road-agent by the back of his neck. "Shall I squeeze the life clean out of ye? Or—be quiet, or I'll cram your mouth full of dry mud!"

Cowed, the road-agent lay silent and still, and Curly Kid resumed his investigations.

Opening the money-bag as it rested upon the head of his captive, he first drew forth the package taken from the person of Nathan Manning, giving vent to a low whistle of surprise as he read the figures written upon the band which held the bills together.

"A nice little mouthful, for a fact! No wonder Captain Clean-up was in an unusually good humor, if all panned out equally as well as did the portly member! But—did they? Suppose we take a look, Curly!"

Pausing occasionally to bend an ear in listening for sounds which would indicate pursuit on the part of the road-agents, Curly Kid completed his inspection of the money-bag and its valuable contents, giving a more lingering breath as he gently swayed that fat package of notes in his hand for a brief space before returning it to the sack.

"A snug little plum for any man's pudding, and for mine, just now, it looks bigger'n a Yankee pumpkin! And—who has the best right to it all, anyway? Who? That's the question!"

The road-agent gave a little stir, but ceased at touch of that ready hand. And then, like one talking to himself, Curly Kid added:

"Who does the property belong to, anyway? Not Nathan Manning, for he was robbed of it, and when a gang of road-agents once take possession, that ends it!"

"Not this fellow, for he was merely a collecting agent, acting for a master. And

certainly not Captain Clean-up, for he got—left! Got left mighty bad, too! And so—Steady, you fool!"

The road agent made a desperate effort to free himself, nerved to the break by sounds which had so far escaped the keen ears of his captor, but which now gave swift warning of the approaching trample of iron-shod hoofs!

These sounds came from the direction of the halted coach, and Curly Kid jumped to pretty much the same conclusion drawn by his prisoner: it was fair warning that Captain Clean-up was in the saddle and bent on playing even for his recent defeat!

"Quiet, you hound!" sternly whispered the Sport from Cheyenne as he closed fingers upon the neck of his captive. "Try to give me away, now, and I'll jerk your head off for a football!"

Rapidly those sounds approached, and as it seemed that the horsemen would pass directly on without having their suspicions awakened by the truth, the road-agent suddenly jerked his neck free, then yelled forth:

"This way! Here he is, and—help!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE BANKER OFFERS A REWARD.

As already shown, that reckless charge of the Cherub from Cheyenne cast all about the halted stage into utter confusion, and all the more so because his appearance was that of a member of that identical band of outlaws.

This disguise probably saved the mad rider more than one wound, if it did not spare life itself, for not until the gray horse had won fairly clear of the mix, was the gelding recognized and the truth even guessed at.

For a few moments it was all utter confusion, where robbed and robbers mixed together on an equal footing; but then Captain Clean up broke away from the little mob, sounding his rallying cry, to which his men responded with trained celerity.

The masked chief was already rushing away in the direction from whence that disguised rider had come, and as he found their horses all set free, nearly all breaking away in shy flight at his impetuous coming, he recognized the ugly truth and hot curses were overflowing his lips as he came upon the staggering guard who had fared so ill at the hands of his supposedly helpless charge.

With a savage shove which lacked little of being a blow, Captain Clean-up sent the half-stunned wretch out of his path, then sprung for his own horse, shouting hoarsely:

"Catch up your nags, men! Catch up and chase—we've got to grip that devil, for he's got our boodle!"

But that proved to be easier said than done. One or two of the more gentle animals were caught without much trouble, but the majority, frightened by these hurried movements, broke free and had to be chased, all this giving Curly Kid time for making good his escape, and at the same time leaving an opening for the stage and its human freight to slip through.

Only for the energetic action of Jimmy Bright this last might not have been so well improved, for Nathan Manning seemed like a man fairly dazed, and his companions in misfortune likewise seemed inclined to delay their flight in hope of—what?

Their money was gone, and though the robbers had seemingly been robbed in turn, that theft was surely committed by another of the same ilk?

But when Jimmy Bright bluntly swore that he'd wait no longer for king or kaiser, Nathan Manning set the example by climbing into the stage and resuming the seat which he had so unwillingly vacated at the pressing invitation given by Captain Clean-up.

For some little time silence reigned within the coach, all hands apparently too thoroughly disgusted with their ill fortune for idle chatter; but then, giving himself a shake, as though casting off brooding thoughts, Nathan Manning ejaculated.

"Didn't I tell you so, gentlemen? Didn't I say that Martin Castle was at the bottom of all this deviltry? You scoffed at me then, Paul Gordon, but now—eh?"

A surly growl cut him short, but as he bent forward like one determined to win a square answer, the veteran digger complied, after his own fashion.

"You say too mighty dug-gun much when you take the hitch off'n that wind-jammer of yours, Nath. Manning!"

"Too much!" echoed the banker, with a stern frown as he glanced swiftly from face to face, then brought his keen eyes to that sour, discontented face once more. "Haven't you had full proof given-you, sir? After what you saw when I tore away that mask—what did you see, Paul Gordon?"

"Waal, fer part I see'd you eatin' dirt an' beggin' that dum critter not to waste a ca'-ridge onto the likes o' ye; that's what I done see'd, Mr. Manning!"

A low chuckle came from the other passengers and a hot flush leaped to the temples of the proud banker; but he as quickly rallied, speaking with forced composure:

"Better men than either you or me have had to knuckle down to road-agents, Mr. Gordon, so I can afford to let your unkind slur go by for the present."

"You fairly flew out at me, not so mighty long ago, when I dared hint at my firm belief that, when all was told, Martin Castle would be found seriously implicated in this hold-up business. You said I'd never dare hint so much to Castle, when we stood face to face. Now—I dared do more than hint, while the rest of you never dared so much as give a nod one way or the other when I asked you to back me up!"

Nathan Manning spoke proudly, and then waited for retort or answer; but none being forthcoming, he added in more placable tones:

"That's all right, gentlemen. You were acting as you deemed wisest, and I'm not the man to fault you for thinking more of your own skins than of either truth or justice. Still, now that all danger is past, I ask you again: whose was the face you saw after I tore away that mask?"

"Waal, it did look monstrous like the mug o' Sport Castle, fer a scan'alous fact!" slowly admitted Dick Brandon, shifting uneasily on his seat. "An' yit—tough, dug-gun ef 'tain't, now! Ef I hedn't see'd with my own two lookin' eyes—"

"You see'd what somebody wanted ye to see, then!" angrily cut in Paul Gordon, now thoroughly aroused. "You didn't see the mug o' Martin Castle, an' that's flat!"

"What!" ejaculated the banker, in strong amaze. "Can you still deny the naked truth, Paul Gordon? After seeing with your own eyes—"

"I never didn't see no sech a dug-gun thing, now, so I never didn't, then!" doggedly persisted the veteran, sinking back into his corner and pulling the leaf of his old hat further over his brows.

There was a brief silence, during which Nathan Manning seemed wrestling with his impatience; but then he spoke again, in calmer tones:

"That's rank nonsense, Gordon, and no one knows it better than you do. You were standing where you couldn't help seeing that face when I laid it bare, and now—why, man, dear, can't you trust in your own eyes?"

"Not ef they try to tell me a blasted lie, I can't!" doggedly mumbled the obstinate old fellow, shrugging his shoulders and sinking into a still more compact heap. "An' it is a dum lie you're tryin' fer to brace up, Mr. Manning! It's all a 'farnal lie!"

Nathan Manning made an impatient gesture, like one who gives a fool over to his own folly, then turned his attention toward the other passengers, speaking rapidly, with all the fluency of one who feels an intense interest in the matter.

"It's not the man so much as it's the thief I'm after, you see, gentlemen! This makes the third time our firm has met with a heavy loss at these same hands, and that's enough to turn saint to devil—ahem!"

"You saw that face, gentlemen! You saw it long enough for recognition, surely? Then—even if you failed to fully recognize Martin Castle in that thief, look at the other evidence!"

"If he was any different person, would he be so swift to deny? If he was not Martin Castle, wouldn't he jump at the chance to shift all responsibility for these audacious

robberies upon other shoulders? Why, you know he'd be only too glad of the chance to blind his trail after so simple a fashion!"

"Waal, it does look that way, fer a scan-a-lous fact!" slowly admitted Dick Brandon, thoughtfully scratching his stubbly chin the while.

"Of course it does, and only the rankest sort of a fool would even try to doubt such evidence, gentlemen!"

"Then I'm jest that sort o' fool, Mr. Manning," deliberately said Paul Gordon, lifting his tall figure to an upright position opposite the portly banker. "But I wouldn't try fer to prove it jest so, ef I was in your place; no I jest wouldn't, now!"

Manning shrunk away a trifle, and a couple of moments passed before he spoke in reply:

"I am not looking for a quarrel with you, Mr. Gordon, and so we will not discuss the point any further. I'll reserve what I have to say until we reach town. But then—"

"That's all right, pardner, an' I hain't gwine fer to kick ag'in that way. Only—better hev a stump or stun mighty handy fer to jump ahind in case the Sport should be inside o' eye or ear-range when ye tune up on that dum-fool ole string: waal, now, I guess yes!"

With the air of one who scorns to demean himself further, Nathan Manning averted his head, leaning back in his corner with closed eyes and folded arms.

That silence was not broken until the stage swung swiftly around a curve which brought them for the first time in sight of Crystal City, and even then that one perilous subject was not touched upon.

Jimmy Bright toolled his hearse through town and up to his customary stopping-place in front of the stage office, next door to the main hotel of the place, but then he lifted his voice to make known the important event before any other could fore-stall him.

If this was not exactly what Nathan Manning could have wished, he was quick to improve the opening thus afforded, and slipping out of the stage on its less crowded side, he scrambled up to the driver's seat with a degree of activity hardly to be looked for in one of his portly build, then stepping upon the roof of the coach itself.

"Shet-up yer dug gun yowltin', an give a gent room fer to spread himself!" shrilly cried out the veteran of the ribbons, doffing his hat and swinging it wildiy as he added: "Three cheers an' a tigah fer Boss Manning! Whoop 'er up, gents!"

Before that wild chorus came to an end, the portly banker was ready to talk, and as silence came he broke it with a terse, clear account of this, the most recent outrage conducted by the robber popularly called Captain Clean-up.

"You know what other crimes and outrages he and his lawless gaang have been guilty of during the past few weeks, so there is no need of my running over the black list," he added, making every word echo clear and distinct.

"Through it all I have had my own suspicions, but I kept them fast-locked within my own bosom so long as I could find doubt in favor of the person I believed to be Captain Clean up. But now—I stand here ready to brand that thief in the broad light of day! I tore the mask from off his face up there in the hills, even as I am now about to tear the mask from his face before your own eyes, gentlemen all!"

"And now I swear to you, one and all, that the face I laid bare up yonder was the face of him whom you have best known as — Martin Castle, the Crystal City Sport!"

A burst of intense amazement answered this swift declaration, and taking advantage of the silence which followed—the breathless pause which so often follows the administration of a stunning shock—Nathan Manning spoke on:

"I stand ready to make solemn oath that Martin Castle is none other than Captain Clean-up, and I now offer a reward for his arrest and conviction as such! I offer—"

Then the storm fairly burst, and the banker ceased speaking, for he could hardly have heard his own voice amidst that chorus of shouts and cries and yells; part for, part against the man thus bitterly denounced as thief and footpad.

For a brief space the banker stood there, his massive figure drawn proudly erect as though defying one and all; then he cried out, harshly:

"Ay! I'll give five hundred dollars out of my own pocket for the arrest and conviction of this so-called Captain Clean-up!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHERUB BURNS MORE POWDER.

WHILE holding his prisoner fast with one hand, Curly Kid made sure of the plunder he had so audaciously won, thrusting one end of the money sack up under his belt, then giving the broad strap a double hitch so loss would be highly improbable, no matter how violent might be his own movements in the impending trouble.

It was while his attention was thus diverted that the road-agent contrived to wrench himself free enough to give that fierce cry of warning and appeal for aid combined.

Cummings heard those beating hoofs come to a confused clatter, and could even catch one or two sharp ejaculations which went to prove that cry had been caught by the ears for which it was intended, and with a muttered exclamation he thrust the road-agent's face violently to earth, then gave him a sharp kick back of an ear as he sprung erect.

"I'd ought to slit your fool throat, by rights, but—steady, boy! We've done it once, maybe we can do it again!"

Letting the stunned rascal lie, Curly Kid sprung into the saddle, drawing his pistols and lifting the hammers by thumb rather than trusting to the double action for a shot in case he had to open a path by burning powder.

As he did this there came a hoarse shout from the not distant road, shaping itself into the words:

"Whar is ye, pard? Whar away, boy?"

The adjacent rocks helped to confuse matters by doubling the echoes, yet Curly Kid knew that this hail came nearly straight for the spot where he was sitting his horse, and naturally expected that it would be followed by something more substantial than an empty hail.

He cast one keen look around as though debating his chances should he either stand his ground or risk flight over a wholly unknown course.

"Looks like it might end in a pocket, or be like climbing the roof of a tipsy barn!" was his grim comment; then he settled himself firmly in the saddle, bending lower as he rode straight forward into what must have seemed almost like the jaws of death.

The gray gelding was both sure and light of foot, but even he could not win the open road without making some noise, and from a little to the left rose a harsh, warning shout:

"Who's comin'? Show up, or—all eyes open, mates! Who's thar?"

A hissing sound escaped the tightly clinched teeth of the Sport from Cheyenne, for this hurried speech showed him the route he intended taking was fairly barred by armed men; but there was no time to spend in counting chances, and bending low over those gray withers, he plied spurs and sent his nag forward at top speed, yelling as he came:

"Cl'ar the course, for here I come, head up and tail over the dasher! Stop a cyclone, but don't you think to block me!"

Through the bushes plunged the gelding, twin spouts of smoke blazing the way, one horse and its rider going down in a sprawling heap as they were struck by that equine thunderbolt.

Curly Kid turned his mount shortly to the right by gripping knees and swaying body, for he saw that the road-agents fairly blocked his further passage in the direction of Hoodoo Gulch.

Crack—crack—crack!

Swiftly his fingers worked triggers, and even as he wheeled in headlong flight along the Crystal City road, Cummings saw more than one of his enemies reeling or falling from their saddles, while oaths and yells burst from the startled road-agents.

"Don't crowd the mourners or the bone-yard won't hold ye all!" he shrilly cried as he lay low along the gray steed's back

turning his head to look back and punctuating his speech with pistol-shots. "I'm a kitten when you pat me the right way, but I'm a tiger when—with my compliments, pardner!"

His weapon cracked as one of the road-agents came plunging ahead of his fellows, and then both man and beast went down in a heap together.

"Set 'em up on the other alley, and send your bill in to—I'm Curly Kid, the Cherub from Cheyenne, and I'm out on a jamboree! Whoop-up! Follow your leader, lads, and if you don't reach heaven, maybe you'll hit—the other sea-port!"

With wonderful rapidity that glib tongue rattled off those sentences, the gray gelding all the while running like a quarter-horse. The last words came floating around an abrupt bend in the stage-trail, followed by a shrill, reckless, taunting laugh.

All the burning powder had not come from his end of the circus, but Curly Kid could well afford to laugh, now that a barrier of living rock rose between himself and yonder smoking weapons; for never a bullet had found its billet so far as he was concerned, and once more he raced away from the Clean-up gang with unbroken skin!

"Too good luck to last through many more such gay dances, though, my boy!" grimly commented the Sport from Cheyenne as he swept his keen brown eyes over his mount, first on one side, then on the other, making sure the gray steed had indeed escape without a scratch. "Next call would be mighty apt to fetch one or both of us, and I'd hate to see you go under, nearly as bad as I would regret taking that trip myself! So—do your duty, heels!"

That was already being done, though, and as he swung around the next curve in that road, Curly Kid vainly looked back for a glimpse of his enemies. He could neither see nor hear aught of the road-agents yet it was hardly probable that they would so soon abandon all chase.

"They owe me a mighty sight more now than they did before," grimly muttered Cummings, as he deftly recharged his revolvers. "I was merely making a noise the first trip, but this time—business! They meant to slay, and I'm 'way off my nut if some of 'em didn't get slaughtered, too!"

For quite a little stretch of road the hills rose abruptly on both sides, and the trail itself was little more than a bed of stone. As the gray gelding dashed along, his hoofs made too much noise for aught to reach those listening ears from the rear, and when his immediate surroundings changed and Curly Kid slackened his speed the better to listen, he failed to detect any signs of close pursuit.

"That's all right, Curly!" he muttered as he again sent his good nag onward. "May-be they've got a polite sufficiency, but I'm betting just the other way. We'll swallow another mile or two, anyway!"

By this time the Cherub had pretty well covered all the ground he had passed over with toll-taker and money-sack in his possession, and as it was at least possible that some member of the lawless gang had lingered near the spot where the Crystal City stage had been held up, he made ready to hold his end level as he rode on at slackened speed, but with all in readiness for a bold dash if those suspicions proved well founded.

But such was not the case. He was fairly-well satisfied that Captain Clean-up had not joined in the chase of himself, for he had looked out for just that human target when he made his desperate dash; but neither was he here to take advantage of this chance to play even.

"Did you lay him out for a high lot on the hillside, old boy?" muttered the Sport, as he gently patted the damp neck of his steed. "I saw him take air like a fellow trying to thrust both ends into the middle, as you struck him, but—Well, 'pears to me he was born to grace the knotted end of a hempen strand—yes, it does, now!"

Past the spot where the stage had been held up, on along that winding road sped the gray steed with its rider, and not until several miles more had been covered did Curly Kid show signs of halting.

At the end of that period he reined down his good horse, looking back and listening for some sounds of pursuit; but none such

came to his ears. If any regular chase had been made, the gray gelding had fairly run away from the road-agents.

"If they are driving me clean back to Crystal City, I want to know it!" muttered the Cherub, riding on again, but with eyes ranging first to one side, then the other. "Maybe they know a short cut which I never heard of! Maybe they're just waiting for me to walk into their open jaws, like I did those set by Captain Clean-up!"

There was more jest than earnestness in those mutterings, however, though Curly Kid acted as though he actually anticipated some such trap.

Taking advantage of a favorable break in the rugged hills through which the road wound, he once more left that beaten track, pausing within fair earshot of the trail, yet where ample cover was afforded him.

Alighting, he once more opened that money-sack, making a more leisurely examination of its miscellaneous contents, then again gently weighing on fingertips that solid package of bank-notes.

"A sweet little liver-pad, if I only had the right to stow it away in a secret pocket, now!" he muttered, in real or admirably counterfeited wistfulness. "A regular bonanza for a Sport who's traveling light through this weary vale of woe, with his uppers doing double duty! With all that at his back, a fellow ought to pretty well clean out this whole region, short cards or banker's lay-out, straight game or crooked! And—why not?" with a half-frown as he flashed a keen look around, then scowling at the gray gelding who stood watching his master.

"Only for me, where'd all this be now? Worse than wasted so far as all honest men are concerned, and so—haven't I fairly earned my day's wages? Then—why shouldn't I button up both lip and pocket, skip the country and begin to blossom forth as a millionaire, with this as a fair starter?"

Curly Kid broke off abruptly at this point, but it was purely because he caught the faint sound of horses' hoofs coming from the direction of Hoodoo Gulch.

Quickly securing the money-sack as before, he gripped his pistols and bent his ear closer to the earth, reading those sounds as though all lay open to his eyes.

"Not more than three sets of—just three nags! Not in too big a hurry for honest pilgrims, yet—dollars to cents it's part of that same old outfit!"

Muttering thus, Curly Kid made a warning gesture to the gray gelding, then stole silently back to the edge of the road, crouching down under cover with ready pistol, waiting for the appearance of those riders.

He was not held long in suspense, for a few moments later three horsemen came within his range of vision, trotting along the road at a fairly brisk gait, yet by no means as though they were in hot pursuit of a hated enemy.

Using his eyes to the best possible advantage, Curly Kid took silent notes until those three horsemen passed out of range, his mustached lip curling a bit as his brown eyes shone more and more brightly.

To all outward seeming those three men were ordinary inhabitants, just such as one is liable to meet at any turn of the day's road; but Curly Kid believed differently, and his lips said as much when he rose from cover to hurry back to his horse.

"Part of the Clean-up gang, for ducats! They've doffed mask and blouse, of course, but if those aren't some of the nags I turned loose back yonder, then I don't ask a red cent!"

Reaching his horse, the Cherub paused for a few seconds like one in deep thought; but then he sprung lightly into the saddle, stripping off that borrowed disguise as he settled himself there.

"I'm better without than with you, now!" he muttered, as he crammed both coat and mask into the money-sack, then firmly knotted the severed ends of that stout strap to his saddle-bow. "Maybe you'll come into play again, though, so—like this!"

Having secured the sack beyond all danger of losing it, Curly Kid passed from cover into the stage road, then headed once more for Crystal City, smiling grimly as he kept a keen lookout ahead for the trio of horsemen

whom he had watched pass his ambush by so unsuspectingly.

Once or twice he caught a glimpse of the horsemen far ahead as the lay of the ground favored his eyes, but as often he slackened pace a bit to avoid discovery.

Almost beyond doubting they were bound for Crystal City, and Curly Kid had no desire to meet them face to face before that town was reached, if even then.

"That depends, too!" he mused as he rode along in the rear of those whom he suspected of being a portion of the Clean-up Gang. "Would there be any money in jumping on their backs? If not, why bother? And yet—that one imp yonder makes my head ache just to see! If I only knew he was the man with the rope: wouldn't I, though?"

Drawing rein at the curve from whence the first fair view of Crystal City might be obtained, Curly Kid waited and watched, making no further move until he lost sight of those horsemen, smiling a bit more grimly as he took note of their tactics.

Instead of heading direct for town, as any honest wayfarers surely would have done, the trio separated, each taking his own devious course, yet all with the same destination in view.

Then Curly Kid resumed his advance, riding quietly down the slope and across the level, taking no pains to mask his advance, although he could not help seeing that something out of the ordinary was taking place near the center of the mining town.

"Cussing and discussing the hold-up, for odds!" was his muttered guess as he caught the sound of confused cheers and still harsher notes. "Looks as though there might be a dangerous storm brewing, too!"

With all this increasing his natural interest in the matter, Curly Kid was not long in deciding to see more of the disturbance, and after riding through several of the more quiet streets, he found a place which suited him, then slighted and secured his horse.

"Kick a hole clean through any fellow who tries to be too mighty familiar, old fellow!" he said, leaving the money-sack at the saddle-bow and glancing at his weapons before he pushed them decorously under his coat.

"You're all right unless one of the gang should spot your gray hide; but I'm risking so much to chance!"

It was easy enough to locate the center of interest, for those confused sounds came at short intervals, and merely taking time to circle far enough around to approach that spot from a point opposite the direction in which lay Hoodoo Gulch, Curly Kid made haste to treat his eyes as well as his ears.

But an entirely unexpected obstacle suddenly showed itself in his way, and with a half-stifled exclamation the Cherub from Cheyenne stopped short at the corner of that building, instinctively gripping pistol-butt as he glared ahead at the figure of a single man who was stealing forward, almost inch by inch, his hands eagerly manipulating the pliant coils of a lasso!

"Rope for rope!" muttered Curly Kid, his eyes all aglow. "Only you pulled me down, while I'll haul you up! Now—what poor devil are you playing for, anyway?"

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE MAN AGAINST THE TOWN.

NATHAN MANNING not only made himself heard by that excited crowd, but he fairly commanded their attention as well.

Silence followed his offer of a reward for Captain Clean-up, for having so positively connected that lawless marauder with the young and dashing Sport so well known to all the citizens, this seemed almost like placing a price upon the head of Martin Castle!

That pause was of but brief duration, however, and a clear, half-mocking voice broke it with the words:

"Yonder's your man right now, Manning!"

The banker caught sight of a pointing hand, and following the direction of that finger, he gave a short, harsh exclamation as he saw a man on horseback, just drawing rein at the nearest corner, apparently surprised by that unusual gathering before the stage office.

Other eyes were similarly directed, and

other voices broke forth in cries and exclamations, some of a friendly nature, but others sounding harsh and menacing in their unfriendliness.

"The Sport himself!"

"Mart. Castle!"

"Don't let him skip the town, but yank him from taw!"

"It's a blooming lie! He's white—clean white!"

"Make him prove it, then! Don't let him fool us longer, men of Crystal City! If he's really Captain Clean-up—"

"I swear he is the head and front of the Clean-up Gang!" sternly cried Nathan Manning, pointing with white hand straight at that horseman who seemed too greatly surprised to either advance or to retreat. "On my sacred honor as a man and a citizen I make oath that Martin Castle is none other than Captain Clean-up!"

"What! You dare bring such a foul charge against me?" sternly cried the young man thus accused, rising higher in his stirrups as he for the first time seemed to realize just what was in the wind.

"I not only make the charge, but I stand ready to prove it in open court, Martin Castle!" sternly retorted the banker, showing no signs of flinching, although he surely must have known what peril he was thus daring. "Arrest him! My offer stands good! Arrest him as—"

"Make a skip of it, lad!" shrilly cried honest Paul Gordon, clearing a space for himself with long arms and active feet. "Back out, or you'll climb a tree, fer keeps!"

Even as he gave this friendly warning, there was a dangerous movement toward the corner where Martin Castle sat his horse, for the sum named by Nathan Manning looked big as a mountain to more than one dollarless fellow in that assembly; but the recoil was just as swift.

For Martin Castle, instead of wheeling his horse in headlong flight, held his ground, and, whipping forth a brace of revolvers, which few men knew better how to use, sternly cried out:

"Steady, the whole of you! Back, men! I'd sorely hate to lay any one of ye out for the sexton, but you can't even begin to take me, unless you can show better and cleaner authority than the bare word of—Nathan Manning, if you even hint that I'm other than a square man, you're an infernal liar, as well as dirty cur and coward!"

"Whooray fer the lad!" enthusiastically cheered Paul Gordon, hurling his old hat high into air, flourishing his long limbs with an energy which nearly upset several of his nearest neighbors. "Chaw that sweet mouthful, dug-gun ye, Nathan Manning! Chaw—Shet up, you!"

The excited veteran made a half-turn and a vicious stroke at a fellow who rudely jostled him just then, and only a duck and a dodge saved that fellow's face from coming to grief.

The banker turned a bit paler at that fierce outburst, but he never flinched, merely folding both arms over his swelling chest with an ostentatious deliberation, which all the more pointedly called notice to his lack of weapons.

Whether Martin Castle rightly interpreted that movement as it was intended, or not, is uncertain, but he did shift his aim from that elevated figure to those nearer if not more dangerous enemies, his stern voice once more sounding a grim warning:

"Go easy, gentlemen! It's for your own sake I'm saying it, too! Keep your linen on until—What's gone wrong here, anyway? You tell, if no honest tongue is ready, Nathan Manning!"

"That is easily done," coldly began the banker, swift to catch at the opening offered. "I repeat what I said before you came: you are the infamous knave who has been masquerading as Captain Clean-up, and—"

"Liar!"

Pale, but steady as a living rock, the banker faced that leveled revolver, over the barrel of which fairly flamed those big brown eyes. And though he could not know but what the words would prove his death-warrant in fact, he steadily added:

"I stand ready to make solemn oath that you are identical with the road-agent called Captain Clean-up, Martin Castle!"

"Then you stand ready to make oath to an infernal lie, and no man living knows that better than you do, Nathan Manning!"

"Dare you stand the test, then, sir?" coldly added the banker. "If you are an innocent man—if you have naught to conceal from these, our fellow-citizens, why not come forward and meet my charges, face to face?"

"Your charges, you infernal fraud! Who set you on a pedestal as judge and jury? Who gave you the right to cast mud at—"

"You dare not stand forward to meet my charges, Martin Castle, for you know, what all these good people shall know equally as well: you know that I can prove you to be Captain Clean-up! You know that the witnesses I mean to call have long been numbered among your warmest friends! You know that—Where were you at four o'clock, Martin Castle?"

Sharply came that question, the banker flinging out an arm as he spoke, long forefinger quivering as it pointed straight at the man on horseback.

It seemed an innocent question, surely, yet Martin Castle actually recoiled before it!

"Where were you at four o'clock, I ask?" repeated Manning, his voice beginning to sound harsh and strained so intensely was he in earnest, now. "That's barely two hours ago, so you can't well plead loss of memory, Martin Castle!"

"What business is it of yours where I may have been at that hour, or any other hour, for that matter?" harshly demanded the younger man.

"It amounts to just this, sir," with his tones rising sharper, clearer as he added: "At that very hour, or within a few minutes either way of that hour, I was tearing the black mask from the face of Captain Clean-up! And—before all this assembly—I solemnly swear that the face I then exposed was—yours, Martin Castle!"

The accused made a passionate gesture, but his words were drowned by the wild, stern chorus which broke from the lungs of the now thoroughly excited crowd.

Now, as at first, there were friendly cries, but those had sadly dwindled before the damning charges so boldly brought against the Crystal City Sport.

Won over to the opposition, or else cowed by those ugly shadows which darkened the honor of their old-time favorite, hardly another save honest Paul Gordon dared boldly sound their faith in the accused.

Nathan Manning lifted his right hand as though commanding silence, and almost instantly the tumult died away.

"I am telling nothing more than the naked truth, Martin Castle," he said, speaking with cold distinctness. "I tore away the mask which had up to that moment effectually hidden the face of him who gave the title and name of Captain Clean-up."

"I laid that face bare to the eyes of your own stanch friends, sir, no less than to my own. And that face was—yours!"

"You lie like a cur when you repeat the words, Nathan Manning!"

"I swear that I am speaking nothing save the honest truth. I swear that the face I exposed was yours, Martin Castle! And if the face was present, surely the body could not be far distant!"

"Where was all this happening, just to humor you for a bit, you dog?"

"On the route between here and Hoodoo Gulch, less than half a mile the other side of the Double Curve," promptly answered the banker.

"Where I haven't been for more than a week past!"

"Where have you been, then? Where have you come from, now?"

"From the Painted Rock, although I'm not admitting your right to question me," half-sullenly answered the Crystal City Sport.

"And you were there at the hour I named? You were there at four o'clock, you claim?"

"I was there—yes," came the less distinct response, while the speaker seemed to shift uneasily in the saddle.

"Of course you can prove all that, my dear sir?" almost blandly persisted the banker, smiling until his strong white teeth showed under a full, red lip as he leaned a little forward.

Now Martin Castle perceptibly hesitated

before making reply, and by so doing he still further damaged his failing cause.

"Only by my word of honor as man and gentleman," he said, after a little; his voice sounding harsh and far from natural. "I was alone, but I swear that I was there at Painted Rock at the hour you name!"

"And I can prove that you were more than twenty miles from the Painted Rock, in an almost exactly opposite direction, sir!" triumphantly cried Manning, drawing his tall form erect with uplifted hand. "It's my word of honor against yours, Martin Castle; only with this difference: you have but your own word, while I—I can prove your presence where I claim, and that out of the mouth of honest men whom all the town will recognize as your own firm friends!"

"Name your witnesses, you lying fraud!"

"Richard Brandon, Amos Covertop, and Paul Gordon! They were with me when Captain Clean-up stopped the stage, and they saw your face when I unmasked the road-agent! Now—surrender, Martin Castle! Yield yourself up to stand trial as an honest man would be only too ready to do, or—take him, men! Arrest him, dead or alive!"

A fierce cry of warning burst from the accused man's lips as the excited crowd surged in his direction, and those leveled revolvers added significant weight to his words:

"Back, the lot of ye! I'll kill the first dozen who dares attempt to lay hands upon me before—Back, I say! I don't want to kill, but I'll never yield tamely to arrest for—"

"If innocent, why so fearful of pure justice, Martin Castle?"

"Why, do you ask, Nathan Manning?" as one of his guns moved muzzle more directly in line with that prominent figure. "Because I've too many personal enemies in that crowd, and because you have—"

"Fairly exposed you here, even as I exposed you over on the trail!" sternly interposed the banker, then crying aloud: "Take him, men! Five hundred dollars for his arrest and conviction!"

"Back, men! And you, Nathan Manning, keep your distance! Lift so much as a finger to cause my arrest and—well, yonder sign will need altering, for the junior partner will be over the range!"

"Now I'm going, men of Crystal City, but don't for an instant fancy that yonder fat knave has scared me into flight. I'll gather my proof, then come back here to face him down as surely as—"

His speech was cut short at that point, for a man sprung forward, making a cast as he came, and the loop of a lasso fell over Castle's head!

CHAPTER IX.

HOW CURLY KID PLAYED EVEN.

With his attention wholly devoted to the front, the man with the rope never gave a thought of the advisability of guarding his rear.

Screened from sight of the excited gathering beyond by the corner of the building at that junction of streets, the lariat-caster crept as close to his intended prey as possible without inviting discovery, then slipped fingers through the different coils of his well-greased lariat, spreading the noose with truly professional skill as he sprung forward to make his cast.

All this Curly Kid saw, and even more: for he quickly recognized something familiar in both action and shape, in garb and in that slight glimpse of a deeply bronzed cheek with its curling mustache.

This was one of the three men who passed him by on the Hoodoo Gulch trail, and almost as certainly the identical knave whose unerring lasso had jerked him out of the saddle in answer to the harsh challenge of Captain Clean-up!

Right or wrong such was his instant belief, and with a far-deeper sentiment now than mere curiosity, the Cherub from Cheyenne glided forward with every nerve strung for his work.

That cast was made with deadly skill. The noose fell fairly and squarely over head and shoulders of the Crystal City Sport, but before the roper could tighten his fatal coil, Curly Kid leaped upon him, striking as he came, knocking the man with the rope endlong as though hit with a club!

A swift slash with a keen-edged blade severed the lariat, and at the same time its owner earnestly called forth:

"Rack out o' this, pardner! I'm Curly Kid, from Cheyenne; look me up for a talk before you think of surrendering, and—pull out, man, or you'll have to pull hemp! Git, or you're done got!"

There was no time for more, and barely space enough granted for so much.

The excited crowd were witnesses to that lasso-cast, and though what followed served to confuse as much as surprise, they were quick to rally and swift to act.

With wild shouts and yells, not unmixed with sterner cries, they surged forward, some of the more reckless burning powder as they came, though the lead was sent too high for working harm to mortal.

Martin Castle seemed thrown off his mental balance at all this, so wholly unexpected, so entirely undeserved, but then he recognized the wisdom of that hasty warning, and jerked his horse around to seek safety in flight.

From his elevated position Nathan Manning had a fair and uninterrupted view of all that transpired, and as he saw that deftly hurled loop close about the broad shoulders of the man he so sternly denounced, a hot flush colored his face and his eyes won a yet more vivid luster.

He gave a hoarse, fierce cry as he saw the roper go down before that sturdy stroke, and with the swift skill of a man thoroughly versed in handling arms, he produced a revolver from some hidden support, almost pitching headlong from the roof of the stage in his eagerness to make his shot count.

Either that half-stumble or else the sudden movement made by Martin Castle caused his first shot to fly wild, and before he could secure a steadier aim, back floated the high-pitched words:

"I'm turning tail now, friends, but I'll come back: come back to clear myself and clean out my enemies!"

"Take him! Dead or alive, take him!" hoarsely screamed the banker as he recovered his balance and took a hasty snapshot at the rider as he whirled around yonder corner. "Take him, I say! Five hundred dollars for the thief, living or dead!"

All this took place with bewildering rapidity, and Curly Kid, active as a cat, had barely time to steady himself after the swift leap which had downed one man and saved another.

He saw the crowd coming with a savage rush; he heard the report of firearms, and caught the ugly screech of a battered bullet as it glanced away from the corner of the building nearest where he stood; he saw the roper confusedly struggling to rise from where that deft fist-stroke had hurled him.

All this he saw and heard, and fairly flinging himself upon that half-stunned lariat-caster, he dragged him nearer the wall, then sprawled himself all over the fellow as he added to the confusion by lustily shouting:

"I've got him! Hyar he is, all! I've got the—Go easy, gents!"

It seemed as though the crowd would trample him and his prey under foot as they came onward, and thinking even more of holding his game than of the rider, whom he had so unexpectedly sided with, just then Curly Kid scrambled to his feet and jerked the roper with him, cramming him hard against the wall with one hand, while with a gun gripped by its mate he threatened both captive and crowd.

"Go easy, the pile o' ye!" he cried in tones which made themselves heard far above all that tumult. "This is one of the Clean-up Gang, and I can prove it! Back, I say! He's my meat, and I'll riddle the man who dares touch him, to harm or help!"

It was like the voice of a master, and backed as those words were by the grim muzzle of a cocked revolver, little marvel that those whom the rush carried nearest should recoil instinctively.

This likewise served to confuse the crowd, since not a few of them jumped to the conclusion that Martin Castle had been taken, and each second that delusion lasted gave the Crystal City Sport a longer lease of life.

Curly Kid may not have realized all this, but he acted just as if he did, firmly gripping his captive and shouting further:

"A fair and square deal all 'round, gentlemen! I can swear to his being a road-agent, but no lynch-law! This way, all honest men! Help to guard this fellow, for he can be made to tell all about the Clean-up Gang if handled rightly!"

Paul Gordon came plunging through the crowd, hatless, almost shirtless, thanks to his desperate struggles to clear a passage, but with breath enough left him to still defend a friend.

"Ye lie like a houn' dog ef ye dast to say the lad is— Waal, now, dog my cats up a crab-apple tree! Ef I didn't—an' she done hain't, nyther!"

The honest fellow stood in glad amaze as he caught a fair glimpse of that desperate face just beyond the Cherub, for up to that moment he had been one of those who believed Martin Castle had gone down under the lariat.

Still others were swift to realize the error, and while some rushed on around the corner in now useless pursuit, others paused in doubt, while a few seemed inclined to look upon the whole affair as a huge jest.

Those laughs did more than anything else to turn the tide, and the Cherub from Cheyenne was keen enough to make the most of his chance.

Still maintaining that paralyzing grip upon the throat of his captive, he again summoned all honest lovers of justice to his aid, boldly declaring that his prisoner was one of Captain Clean-up's knaves, and that through his lips should come the true story of the recent hold-up.

Now that their first blind fury had spent itself, even those who had been first to catch up the fierce howl against Martin Castle showed an inclination to listen to calmer reason, and past experience telling him he had naught further to dread from lynch-law, Curly Kid cheerfully yielded up his captive to other hands.

Vainly the fellow vowed his complete innocence, calling upon many of those present to bear witness to his honorable character. He was quickly pinioned and prepared for confinement until more definite plans could be put into shape.

Nathan Manning left his perch upon the stage-roof as the excitement seemed to center there at the corner, and he was one of those who viewed that new actor with strong suspicion.

"Who and what is he, anyway?" he asked sternly, while the roper was being bound by those volunteer hands. "Who's to say he isn't one of the gang himself, for didn't he chip in to save the chief villain of them all?"

"That's what's the matter, boys!"

"Durned ef he didn't just do that, too!"

"Make him show up white, or"—

"He's a liar, and I can prove it," hoarsely cried the prisoner as he struggled desperately to break away from those who were just starting him off for a temporary prison. "You all know me! I'm poor, but I'm clean white! I'm—you can go my bail, Mr. Manning, sir."

"Not if he really wants to break up the Clean-up Gang, he can't," swiftly cut in the representative from Cheyenne, before the banker could shape an answer to that appeal. "I say I can prove—"

"And who may you be sir?" sternly demanded Manning, pushing a bit closer, the citizens readily giving him place. "Who set you up in such authority, pray?"

"Who am I?" blandly echoed the adventurer, smiling sweetly and giving a genial wave of his still armed hand. "An angel just let drop from the pure ether above your august cabeza. I'm Curly Kid, for short, last from Cheyenne, the proud emporium of the prairies! None of your common truck, please bear in mind, for I'm not one of a litter, but was whelped with an object!"

"Talk is cheap, but who's to go your bail, sir? Who's to swear that you're not one of that lawless outfit, since you've chipped in so boldly to cover the cowardly flight of Martin Castle—of your own Captain Clean-up?"

Again that ugly muttering made itself heard, and the bravest of men might well have turned pale before those dark and threatening faces.

Few men living could better estimate that danger, but Curly Kid never flinched,

never changed color, still smiling blandly as he made reply:

"That's all right, pardner! You're simply doing what you hold to be your bounden duty as an honest citizen, while I am squatting in a box of precisely the same pattern! And so—I've got a little song to sing, gentlemen all, and over yonder seems to be the proper stage, since all can see as well as hear!"

Curly Kid pointed toward the coach which still stood in front of the stage office, and pushing forward in that direction he added:

"Give me half a show, friends, and if I fail to read my title clear enough for your entire satisfaction—well, you can easily enough turn the stage into a gallows, can't you?"

Banker Manning seemed hardly content with this sudden turn, but as Paul Gordon rubbed up against him just then, he could not interfere until interference was too late.

Swiftly yet without aught in his motions to hint at actual flight, the Cherub from Cheyenne made his way to where the stage was standing, then actively climbed to its roof, taking off his hat and making a motion as though commanding even while begging for attention.

Silence reigned, and there in the gathering dusk his trim-built figure stood forth in clear relief against the sky. A brief pause, then his lips parted and he spoke to that gathering:

"I've told you who I am, gentlemen, and now I'll tell you just why I caught the goose and let the gander go! Because I can make oath that fellow with the rope was a road-agent, while I wasn't so dead sure of the man in the saddle!"

CHAPTER X.

THE COOL HAND FROM CHEYENNE.

A BRIEF silence followed this remark, but then a voice came from out the crowd with almost painful distinctness:

"All Crystal City knows Jack Lawson, but who knows you? I can swear to seeing you here, yesterday, but where were you to-day, when the stage was being robbed?"

"Now you're talkin', Lucky Dickson!" cried another voice. "Make him show clean papers, or—waal, he'd look mighty purty dancin' on empty wind, now wouldn't he, mates?"

"Hear me first, then do your hanging if you honestly think I deserve to hop the twig after that fashion, my dear friends," coolly spoke the man on the stage. "If you ask in earnest, I'll answer the same way: I was right there, my friends! I saw nearly the whole affair, for—"

"You were one of the lawless gan?" then?" harshly demanded Manning.

"I haven't said so, as yet, and you can't prove it. For one reason, you were too mighty bad scared for taking note of who were present!"

This retort brought forth a laugh from such of the gathering as held no particular love for the portly banker, but at the same time it strengthened suspicion against the speaker.

Cummings was keen enough to realize this, and he made haste to add:

"Laying jesting aside, gentlemen, I downed the fellow you call Jack Lawson in preference to the other, simply because I could make oath this man was a member of Captain Clean-up's Gang, while I could at worst only suspect Martin Castle."

Nathan Manning, looking stern and sour, pressed a bit closer to the stage while Curly Kid was speaking, and now sharply interjected:

"Who can go your bail, I repeat, sir? Who can say that you weren't one of those black-masked devils yourself, even?"

There was a brief pause, then the Cherub from Cheyenne coolly said:

"Well, now, since you seem so bent on daubing me all over with pitch, my dear sir, I'll answer you, first. To tell the truth and shame the adversary, I was one of them!"

Even Nathan Manning seemed fairly dazed by this reckless admission, but before worse could come of it, Curly Kid swiftly added:

"I was one of the fellows you saw with black masks and beathan shirts on, Mr. Manning, but if you'll only hear me clean through to the end of my little story, you'll think rather than try to hang me!"

"Talk a straight string, then, stranger, or we may not wait to bother a rope, so far as you are concerned," coldly threatened Lucky Dickson, the well-known sport who had chippered in shortly before.

As he spoke one finger significantly tapped the metal-bound butt of a revolver, but Curly Kid smiled blandly as ever, bowing his comprehension even as he made reply:

"Fair play is all I ask, sir, and you're no true sport if you're not willing to grant that much. Now—this is pure business, gentlemen!

"I struck your beautiful and lively burgh yesterday, I spent last night in yonder hotel, and left here shortly after dinner, to-day. I took the trail to Hoodoo Gulch, not because I preferred that to this, but simply because business beckoned me that way—ahem!

"The first hint I had of trouble came in the shape of a rope, and I took a lay down right there in the dust; not through choice, gentlemen, I assure you, but simply because I couldn't help myself!

"The next I fairly knew was being cross-questioned by a fellow rigged out in regular road agent style, with a cloth mask over his face and a John Chinaman shirt that came down to meet his boot-tops.

"That was my first experience with Captain Clean-up and his family, gentlemen, and he flatly told me he'd raked me in from law simply to guard against my warning the coming stage of his ambuscade!"

"How could you know he had formed an ambuscade, sir, unless you were playing in cahoots with him?" sharply demanded Nathan Manning.

"I didn't know it, and even if I had been so wise—well, I'm by no means certain that I would have interfered, for I was born bashful! I may not look that way, good friends, but it's a fact: I was born bashful, and I've been growing worse ever since weaning-time!"

"You said that you were one of the gang!"

"I said that I was one of the fellows you saw wearing black masks, Mr. Manning," blandly amended the Cheyenne representative.

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"Well, hardly! To prove it—just open your ears a bit wider, my dear sir!"

"As I said, I was roped in by road-agents. If they had treated me at least half-way white, I'm not sure that I'd have made them any further trouble, for I'm bashful! But—they treated me as I'd never treat an egg-sucking cur, and so I took my pay!"

"I watched my chance while the main gang was busy over you four gentlemen, and then—I turned robber myself, simply to rob the robbers in their turn!"

"Do you begin to see light through the knothole, Mr. Manning? If not, here she comes: I was the little cyclone that split the Clean-up Gang wide open! It was my horse that knocked Captain Clean-up tail-over-appetite, and I was the fellow who snatched up the toll-taker, money-bag and all!"

Nathan Manning gave a short cry of amazement at this announcement, although it could hardly have taken him wholly by surprise, led up to as the declaration had been. He started a bit forward, quickly asking:

"And the money? Where is it? What have you done with the money, I ask you, sir?"

Curly Kid made an airy gesture at this impetuous demand, looking and carrying himself like one who feels he has fairly won the right to take his own course for the time being.

"Go easy, my dear sir, and thereby lessen the dangerous strain on your linen! It's still in the early gloaming, and time enough before us all for— Is Paul Gordon present?"

"Bet your sweet life I be, now!" came a hearty response from the veteran. "An' I'm jest eetchin' fer to grub that paw of yours, parduer; waal, now, I shoredly am!"

"I couldn't meet a more honest grip, I'm confident, but business comes before pleasure, and so—will you do me a favor, Mr. Gordon?"

"Quicker'n seat in a holy hurry ef ye jest show me the way, sir!"

"I ask you to serve me in this, both because you are an honest man and interested in what's coming, Mr. Gordon. Now—please go fetch up my horse: a gray gelding

—which you will find by turning yonder corner, going ahead two blocks, making one turn to the left, then looking for a vacant lot just back of where a house has been burnt down, recently.

"Do you think you can find the place by my directions, sir?"

"I know the place well as I know the road to my own mouth when I'm hungry—holler clean to the heels o' me! Git out o' the way, or I'll run ye over wuss'n a bull-gine on a bender!" cried the excited old fellow as he tore away upon the mission given him.

Curly Kid, knowing well that he need fear no further trouble so long as he could hold his audience under the spell of wonder and expectation, stood at ease during that brief absence: for with rare celerity Paul Gordon moved, and came dashing back upon the gray gelding almost before an ordinary messenger could have covered half the distance.

"Hand me up the bag you have there at the pommel, please," spoke Curly Kid, stooping over the rail as the gray steed halted beside the stage. "Thanks! And now, gentlemen all, I'm pretty nearly at the tail-end of my little song, so keep your ears wide open!

"It's hardly for a bashful fellow like me to explain just how I turned the trick, for that savors a bit too much of boasting. But I can't well get out of saying this much:

"I slipped my bonds, I knocked my guard cold, then put on his disguise, mounted my own bag and charged the Clean-up Gang!

"I had to do that, for they were in my road, and I didn't know the way round, so don't give me too mighty much credit, please!"

"Durned ef he wasn't little ole h—l on ten wheels!" fairly spluttered Paul Gordon, seemingly just beginning to realize the whole bewildering truth. "Billy-be-blamed if he didn't split—the good Moses!"

"Wait until I've left the stage, please, my dear sir, and so spare me burning blushes," simpered the Cherub with mock modesty, fingertip crossing pouting lip, his curly head leaning toward a shoulder to suit.

"I'll never do it again, gentlemen, if you'll kindly overlook my fault for this once! But—as I said, I really couldn't help it! The little toll-taker was in my way, and I needed a protection of some sort for my back; and so—I just swung the little rascal over my shoulder and cut stick for tall timber!"

He paused for a moment, then added in far different tones:

"If you wish to know what further happened, gentlemen, take the road to Hoodoo Gulch and keep your eyes open for red paint! I had to burn a little powder, over there, and some of the fool gang run up against my lead when it was flying swiftest. And so—that's enough!"

He gave the money-bag to Paul Gordon, saying:

"This holds all the plunder taken from you four gentlemen. Pay it back to those who own it, please, and save me the trouble."

Turning away without waiting to hear the voluble thanks which Paul Gordon was pouring forth, Curly Kid spoke on, in stern, cold tones which formed a startling contrast to those he had so recently used.

"All that being off my mind, men of Crystal City, I'm ready for business! Some of your number have seen fit to sling foul mud my way, and it's more particularly to those persons I'm talking right now.

"I'm Curly Kid, the Cherub from Cheyenne! I'm not one of a litter, but born on purpose! I may not be quite an angel of light, but neither am I an imp of darkness! It is barely possible that there are a heap sight better men within hearing of my voice this moment, but I say this, and I say it loud:

"I'm a better man in every respect than those who have been flinging filth this way, and I can do up each and every cur who dares to look cross-eyed in my direction!"

He paused in his coldly-fierce defiance, flashing keen looks around over that assembly like one who would be more pleased than frightened at a counter-challenge; but none such came, though from here and there arose a low, uncertain murmur.

"Don't misunderstand me, gentlemen,

please," he added, in less fierce but still coldly resolute tones. "It's not my habit to roam over the country seeking gore, or proclaiming myself cock of the walk. I was simply going on about my private business, but now I've got into the middle of this nasty mix, right here I'll stick until the clean up!"

"If there is any sport present who really fancies he can, or thinks he ought to lift my scalp, let him begin shooting before he warns, or I'll eat him up so mighty quick he'll never know what ails him!"

"There you have it, one and all. I've read you my pedigree, and given you my fair warning. That clears my mind and gives me room for remembering my stomach.

"So long, gentlemen! I'm so hungry that my waist feels long as a liberty pole! I'm going for my regular chuck, and if you don't split of your own accord, I'll eat my bigness right through the middle of ye."

Breaking off with a light, reckless laugh, Curly Kid sprung down from the stage-roof, giving a fellow a dollar to take his good horse to the stable attached to the hotel. Then he pressed through the crowd, which parted to grant him free passage, leisurely mounting the steps which led up to the hotel entrance, without deigning a look around him.

CHAPTER XI.

A STAKE WELL WORTH PLAYING FOR.

DURING the last few minutes Nathan Manning had very little to say, for he saw that the tide had fairly turned, and almost for the first time since he took rank in Crystal City he found his word was not all-powerful.

Only for the production of that money-bag, still containing the plunder collected by the road-agents, his task might have been an easier one; but with that held up where all eyes could see, while the hero of that audacious dash was so glibly giving his account of the affair, what better could he do than maintain a dignified silence?

The hot blood tinged his face as the Cherub from Cheyenne delivered his closing defiance, for he could not well avoid taking part of those insolent words to himself; even if his own conscience had remained silent, the subdued snickers and half-vailed hints of more than one neighbor in the crowd would have lent that defiance keener point.

Paul Gordon added to the piquant flavor so highly relished by at least a portion of the gathering, mounting the stage in his turn and giving his version of the hold-up, and the adroit manner in which the road-agents had been cheated out of their lawless gains; nor did he wholly spare the proud banker himself when he produced Manning's share of the recovered booty.

It was a hard pill to swallow for one so proud, but even Nathan Manning could not afford to pay so heavy a price for his pride, and the banker came forward to receive his property.

Without pausing to examine either package of money, or the less valuable articles, Nathan Manning turned away and pressed through the crowd, only drawing a full breath when fairly clear of that gathering.

Curly Kid had passed from sight through the hotel entrance, and with a far from holy wish sent in that direction, the banker hurried off through the gathering darkness, making the best of his way to the residence of his partner in business, Isham Waller.

That residence was sufficiently far removed from the scene of excitement to make it seem natural enough that Mr. Waller should miss placing a correct interpretation upon that noise, even if the tumult had reached his ears, and hence Nathan Manning expressed no surprise when he found the senior partner quietly enjoying an after-supper cigar.

But Isham Waller was shrewd enough to see that something out of the ordinary run had taken place the instant his eyes rested upon the figure of his partner, for both face and garments showed signs of past if not present trouble.

"Surely you haven't—What's happened you, Nathan?" he demanded as he hastily sprung to his feet, flashing a glance over that disordered appearance. "Surely you never—Speak out, man alive!"

With the privilege of intimate friendship, which was almost the same as being a member of the family, Manning had entered the house without rapping or other formal warning.

He looked quickly around the room, giving a half-scowl as though he found something lacking. This gave Mr. Waller time for asking his startled questions, and not until he saw that they two were the sole occupants of the room did the junior partner make reply.

"Some more of Captain Clean-up's work, of course!"

"Robbed? Surely you were not—and the money, Manning?"

Mr. Waller betrayed strong excitement, if indeed that uneasiness had not a more serious foundation. Manning smiled grimly, yielding to temptation for the moment.

"There were only four of us along, Waller, and we were taken completely by surprise. We were covered by half a score guns before we could even suspect what was coming; and so—we were stripped of every dollar, and of every dollar's worth, save and except the clothes we stood in!"

"And you had—how much of it, Nathan?" huskily asked his partner.

"The full amount, not counting in my own private funds. Almost too much to lose without making a vigorous kick, wasn't it?"

"Of course, we can stand it, but then—you're holding something back, Manning! What is it, man?"

For answer his junior produced the package of bank-notes, laughing briefly as he placed the bundle upon the table at Waller's elbow, then leaning back in his chair with a half-sneering smile upon his strong face as the elder man swiftly ruffled the ends of those bills with practiced fingers in counting.

"All here!" he ejaculated at length, looking up with a relieved air, yet plainly puzzled to account for it all. "You said—"

"That the money was taken, and now I add that it was recovered. Let me tell you how, then I've something further to say."

In as few words as he well could, Nathan Manning told how that packet of bills had come back to his hands, then quickly adding, like one who prefers to postpone closer questioning for the time being:

"So much by way of setting your mind at rest as to the money, Waller; and now—can you give a guess as to who Captain Clean-up really is? Who do you reckon has been at the bottom of all this trouble?"

"How can I even guess?" gloomily answered the elder man, leaning head upon his hands as he sighed heavily. "It's another heavy shock, Nathan, and—and I'm getting too old to bear up under the like!"

"Then you do guess—"

"There's money to be made in the business, Manning; it's a paying business, even cramped as we were at one time when—but is it worth all the risk we are running? Think of it, man! This makes the third time we've been struck for a heavy sum, and—what comes next?"

"Well, why not a necktie party?" asked Manning, with grim humor.

If Isham Waller heard he hardly heeded him, muttering on:

"Who's to say that the next thing will not be an armed raid on the bank, with murder as the outcome? I've been thinking it all over, of late days, Nathan, and now—this pretty nearly decides me!"

"To do what, pray?"

"To draw out of the whole business and take Marion back East with me, of course!"

"Wait a bit, my dear sir, and don't decide in too great haste. You talk of an armed raid on the bank, with bloody murder as trimmings?"

"Is that an impossible contingency, sir?"

"Well, such things have happened elsewhere, and very possibly might be repeated here at Crystal City, unless—unless we take time by the forelock and make an example of this Captain Clean-up by hanging him up for the crows to caw over!"

"If that only might be! But you know—"

"But I do know, Waller, and I can swear to the identity of Captain Clean-up! I tore the mask from his face this very afternoon, and that face belongs to—Martin Castle!"

The voice of the banker gave a barely

perceptible falter as it came to that name, for just then the door opened to admit a young woman; but Manning ended with spiteful emphasis as he turned head to look fair and squarely into the face of Marion Waller.

A truly beautiful face that was, too, but just now it showed less color than usual, while those big black eyes seemed backed by living fire as their owner crossed that threshold, flinging up a hand as she almost sharply exclaimed:

"Tis false, sir! Tis all false, and no man living knows that better than you do, Mr. Manning!"

"Marion—child!"

"Never mind, Mr. Waller," coldly interposed the junior partner as he rose to his feet, pale but composed as he met that look of hot indignation. "May I ask in what I have proved false, Miss Marion?"

"When you dare couple the good name of Mr. Castle with— Oh, for shame, Nathan Manning! How dare you utter here words which you would never risk pronouncing in his presence? How dare you charge a gentleman, honest and true as steel, with being—Faugh!"

The maiden turned away her head with a swift gesture of scorn and loathing, but the banker never flinched, his voice cold and stern as he spoke again:

"I have already accused Martin Castle with being the infamous road agent, thief, footpad, cowardly assassin, Miss Waller. I charged him with playing the role of Captain Clean-up, right here in Crystal City, before fully half of our entire population!"

"Surely you never, Manning?" exclaimed Waller, greatly excited.

"I surely did, as you can readily learn for yourself, sir. And he—this immaculate saint, this honest gentleman, this paragon of all that is pure and lofty; what of him? Ah, what of him, Miss Waller?

"Did he rise up in his generous wrath and devour me? Did he even— Bah!" with a swift outflinging of his strong white hand, lip curling until those even teeth gleamed there under the lamplight.

"Martin Castle wheeled his horse and fled like the thief I so publicly branded him! Fled from the gallows which he so richly merits! And this is the gallant gentleman you so generously defend, poor girl!"

Marion shrunk back, but it was from that tone of commiseration rather than from the swiftly piled-up charges against the man whom she had learned to love as only one of her ardent nature can love.

"It is false! You are basely maligning a gentleman beside whom you are of no more worth—"

"Wait, Marion," swiftly interposed the banker, his cheeks flushing warmly beneath her scorn: a scorn which seemed fairly unable to express itself in fitting words. "Don't commit yourself too far, I beg of you!"

"I have heard too much to care to listen longer, sir."

"Wait, I say! I can prove my charges. Out of the mouths of his own friends I'll convict Martin Castle, I tell you!"

"And I repeat: never, sir! Martin Castle is honest and true, while those who so basely malign him are—"

"Your best friends, girl, if the ugly truths they are now prepared to give the world will only break the evil spell that graceless villain has cast over you!" passionately cried Nathan Manning, towering above both father and daughter as he spoke in real or admirably counterfeited emotion, such as only the just and generous can feel.

He stepped forward with right hand offered, but the maiden fell back with a repellent gesture, swiftly speaking:

"No, Mr. Manning! Martin Castle's enemies are mine, and I'd sooner die than touch a hand which has been raised against him!"

Then, as though unwilling to trust herself longer, the maiden turned and fled from the room, leaving the partners alone with each other.

For a few seconds Nathan Manning stood like one petrified, gazing at the door which had closed behind the maiden; but then he drew a long breath, turning toward his host

with a faint, painfully forced smile as he gloomily muttered:

"You saw—you heard, Isham? And yet—I love her still!"

The elder man shook his head, uneasily, seeming loth to fairly meet those burning eyes. He sunk back into the chair he had left at the coming of his daughter, nervously fingering that money-package the while.

The lip of his partner curled with sudden scorn, but then a quick sweep of that white hand banished the ugly emotion for the time being.

"You've let the poor girl have her own way entirely too much of late, Waller. She has grown fairly infatuated over that devilish Sport, and now—why do you shake your head like that, Waller?"

"I can't make it come clear, Nathan! Martin Castle surely isn't the sort of knave you're trying to make out!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE NOOSE BEGINS TO DRAW.

It was with strangely confused emotions that Martin Castle wheeled his horse to seek present safety in flight, with more than one bit of grooved lead humming viciously above his head and that of his good steed.

For those first few minutes he seemed more like one under the ugly influence of a nightmare dream than one wholly awake to what was going on about him.

To be accused of such crimes! To be publicly branded as an infamous lawbreaker! And—there lay the keenest sting of all, just then—he was powerless to prove those accusations false!

Like a revelation that bitter truth flashed across his brain; as though an actual voice had put the thought into ringing speech, he knew that to save his very life he could not at once prove his innocence!

The flying end of that severed lariat lightly caught upon some obstacle, giving his throat a painful wrench, and this actual pain served a good turn: it called him back to the present, and with a quick motion he cast that noose off his person, then bent low along the withers of his good horse, giving him free rein and riding for dear life!

Behind him rung forth that ugly tumult! He could hear fierce voices uplifted in fiercer threats. He could see a living mass showing there at the corner where he had impulsively drawn rein at sight of that unusual gathering only a few brief minutes before.

His strong teeth came together with an audible click as he felt for and tightly gripped the butt of a trusty revolver.

"Not alive—never alive to die by the rope, you devils!" came patiently across his lips as he took that backward glance, then swung his steed around the next corner, raking those already sweat-damp flanks with his armed heels.

Fortunately for him, perhaps, that excitement had lasted long enough to spread pretty well throughout the town, so there were few people to be seen during the few moments it took for Martin Castle to win fairly clear of Crystal City, and not one of those few offered to bar his way or give him a shot in passing.

Then, with the town behind him, the Sport of Crystal City began to rally his scattered wits and to more coolly count the odds so suddenly risen up against him.

As by instinct he set down Nathan Manning as at the bottom of it all, for he had long since divined that the portly, middle-aged banker had fairly entered the lists of love against him, as suitor for the hand and heart of Marion Waller, the only child of Isham, his partner in business.

"It's all an infernal trick on his part to down me!" Castle muttered, gesticulating fiercely in keeping with his thoughts. "He knows that I never—ha! How could he know that I wouldn't be in town? How could he be so dead sure I couldn't prove an alibi, unless—did he play me a trick? Was that note—"

A hand slipped into his breast as he turned half-way in the saddle for a backward glance.

Yonder lay Crystal City, only a dim mass now, for though the twilight was rapidly deepening into night, as yet few lights had been struck.

His ears were keen enough to catch dull, confused sounds in that direction, but he

saw no signs of actual pursuit, as yet. But then—he gave a low, grating ejaculation which fell little short of being an oath, for there they came—his enemies!

Again the spurs came into good play, and with quickened pace the horse dashed away toward the now near hills, his hoofstrokes deadened by the thick carpet of sand.

Those shadows proved friendly to the fugitive, now, for they covered his flight, and when he struck rising ground, he looked back to see the vain and blind rush checked; with naught to show them whither their longed-for prey had gone, of what avail further pursuit?

Martin Castle drew rein and paused long enough to satisfy himself that there was no fully organized effort to capture him, then he rode on once more, head bowed and heart sore.

More than ever he felt convinced that Nathan Manning had plotted and planned with truly devilish art to convict him in the sight of all honest people—in the eyes of his loved one, Marion Waller! But—how could he prove that that infernal lie was not the bald truth?

In his breast-pocket rested now a hasty note over the signature of his best, nearest, most trusted male friend, begging him in the name of that friendship to hasten without delay to the prominent landmark known as Painted Rock.

"Why didn't he meet me there, then? Why did he fail to—heavens! Could Nathan Manning have—was it only a cunning scheme to get me away from all friends?"

It seemed hardly possible, and yet—

"That cunning devil! He'd never dare bring such a foul charge as that without first knowing I couldn't face him down in his lies! Yet— On, boy! You've got to go! Only Conway himself can set all these ugly doubts at rest!"

Up to this moment Martin Castle had been riding nearly at random, so far as an immediate destination was concerned, but now came a change. He had an objective point, and urged his good steed on at top speed, heading for the distant claim which his heart-brother, Asa Conway, was now holding down, hoping against hope that he would soon "strike it rich!"

That break-neck pace could not be maintained for long. His course led him away from any beaten line of travel, and there were times when his good nag could only bear him onward at a walk.

Making the best time practicable, it was far into the night before Martin Castle gained the remote and lonely point where Asa Conway had planted his location-stakes, and the rude little cabin which sheltered the miner was wrapped in darkness.

Springing out of the saddle and letting his tired horse pick its own way to the still ruder shelter of sticks and stones which harbored the one meek burro constituting Asa Conway's stud, the Crystal City Sport gave a warning shout as he strode up to that slab door.

"Aee! Ace Conway! Open up, man, or I'll kick your door down!"

That harsh call, added to a vigorous application of sole-leather, proved sufficient to break the slumbers of the toil-weary miner, as a hasty grunt and scrambling movement beyond that door gave evidence.

"Who in thunder— You, is it, Castle?"

"Yes. Open up, man! I want to ask you why— Open up, man!"

"Open comes, and here I am, old friend, ready for riot or ruction, if you want it that way! And—you're in trouble, Mart?"

"Up to my neck, Ace!" gloomily answered the Sport as he stepped across the threshold. "Strike a light, please. I've got something to show you before I say anything further, Conway."

A candle was quickly lighted, and without wasting time to complete his toilet, the miner held out a hand, saying:

"What is it, Mart? Show me— What?"

A torn envelope dropped into his hand, and Castle asked:

"Did you write that, Ace? Open and read it, man!"

Conway complied, holding the paper close to the candle the better to decipher that hurried scrawl, at the bottom of which was written his own name: an urgent request for Martin Castle to meet him at the Painted

Rock that day at one o'clock, sharp. And if he failed to find the writer there on time, to wait until five o'clock, at least.

Reading all this, Asa Conway looked up with grave eyes to say:

"I never wrote a word of it, Mart. Shall I swear I didn't?"

"You never wrote it, Ace? You are sure—dead sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be sure, Castle? Do you think for a moment that I would—lie to you about such a silly joke as this seems to be?"

The Crystal City Sport flung forth a hand, laughing shortly, harshly.

"It's a jest that may end in yanking me up a tree by the neck, Ace! It's a joke that I've got to prove a lie, or—how can I prove it, though?"

Asa Conway let that forged note fall unheeded to the floor, reaching forth both hands to grasp those of his friend; for never before had he seen that strong, self-reliant man so near the verge of breaking down as right now!

"What is the trouble, Mart? Spit it out, old man! You know me; you know that I'll back you up against all the world, with the devil himself thrown in to make full measure!"

Martin Castle forced a smile as he tightly grasped those honest hands, and then dropping down upon the edge of the bunk out of which Asa Conway had tumbled at his rude summons, he hastily but clearly told his story.

He had found that note waiting for him at the hotel where he had his room, and never for an instant doubting its genuineness, he took horse without delay and hastened to the Painted Rock.

There he waited and watched for the friend who failed to keep that appointment, only leaving the rendezvous after five o'clock was come and gone, then riding back to Crystal City, worrying sorely over that strange affair.

And then, all that happened after.

When he ceased speaking, Martin Castle gazed into a face fully as grave and quiet as was his own. And then, once more grasping his hands between his own honest palms, Conway slowly spoke:

"I'd go to town and make my oath you were in company with me all those hours, only—I can't! I was right here on my claim from daylight until dark."

But, if I had time given me to probe all this vile trickery to the bottom," muttered Castle gloomily. "Of course, I couldn't expect you to lie, even for my sake, but—"

"I'd spit out lies enough to reach from here to the moon if that could help you any, partner," impulsively cried Conway, tightening his grip as those hands tried to withdraw. "But, would Dan Wheatley lie the same way? Would he back me up in my alibi? That's the question."

"Dan Wheatley?"

"Yes. He came here just before noon, and hung around the place until after I gave him his supper. And so—"

Martin Castle made a savage gesture as he sprung to his feet.

"Nathan Manning hired him! That devil never left me a loophole to slip through. He sent Wheatley here to play spy, and now—well," with a short, reckless laugh, as he hitched up his belt of arms and faced the door, "if I'm doomed to go up, I know, at least, who'll go down!"

"Steady, pardner!" cried Conway, arresting that movement before the door could be flung open. "What are you going to do, man alive?"

"Go back to town and kill that devil; then take my medicine like a white man—what else is there left for me to do, Ace?"

"That's worse than foolish, man! You're going to hide out until the worst of this storm blows over. And I'm going to split matters open so mighty wide that the truth can't hold leaking out. So—"

"Hide out? I? You tell me that, Asa Conway?"

"Isn't it that or pull hemp, Martin Castle?"

"All right, and I'll take the grim alternative!" as he swung the athletic miner out of his way. "At least I'll go off the stage like a white man, and I'll send that devil, Nathan Manning, on ahead to clear the path for my

soul! I'm worse than a fool for giving him all this night for spitting forth his infernal poison, though!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHERUB AND THE BANKER.

THERE was something in his partner's voice, and even more in his manner which failed to wholly satisfy Nathan Manning, and though he had come off fairly in his verbal encounter with Marion, the portly banker was hardly in condition just then to smooth away new obstacles save by force.

"You're the last man living, Mr. Waller, to defend that infernal scoundrel!" he spoke, harshly, his brows gathering in a dark scowl. "Would you have the whole country laughing at this mad infatuation of your daughter? Would you have—"

"Don't—don't talk that way, man!"

"Why not, when you are so willing to give all other men fair grounds for making like comments? Why, Waller, can't you see it, man? Can't you even now begin to realize what it all means? With that cursed knave not only a road-agent, but one fairly and squarely exposed as such in the broad light of day! With your daughter—"

"She never doubts him, and—I'd rather trust to her womanly intuition, Manning, than to your jealous hatred!"

It was not often that Isham Waller, ordinarily so mild, so quiet, so nearly meek in voice as in manner, assumed such a front, and his partner not only flushed before him, but even shrank a little away.

Not for long; barely long enough for swift notice then he leaned nearer the elder man, speaking swiftly, sternly:

"Are you in sober earnest, sir? Are you really foolish enough to palter now, when the whole future of your only child hangs in the balance?"

"If I only knew what—if I could see just how—" uneasily muttered the old gentleman brushing one unsteady hand across his forehead, but then rallying and speaking with more spirit:

"I tell you there's something wrong, Manning! There must be some ugly mistake in all this, for—my poor girl would never so ardently love a criminal, and while Martin Castle lives—"

"He'll not live much longer!" sternly cried the junior partner as he caught up his hat and turned toward the door. "I pledge you my word of honor that he shall hang as a thief and a road-agent, and that before either you or Marion can commit yourselves further!"

Without pausing for retort or reply, Nathan Manning left the house of his partner in anything but a delightful state of mind.

To do him simple justice he was madly in love with the girl, and the knowledge, only recently gained, that Martin Castle had won where he thought to wear, added jealousy to the other reasons he had for hating the Crystal City Sport.

But Nathan Manning was more than a fair actor in his limited sphere, and by the time he gained the outer air, his emotions were put under and there was naught in his face to betray his intense chagrin and anger!

He turned in the direction of the hotel, but there was no longer an uproar in that direction. Even so soon that startling sensation had begun to pall, and without fresh additions would be fairly stale by the morrow!

When Nathan Manning came in sight of the hotel, he noticed a figure seated at ease there beneath the glass-shielded lamp, chair tilted back at a perilous angle, legs crossed and heels supported by one of the wooden pillars; the Cherub from Cheyenne, enjoying an after supper cigar!

Careless though that attitude was, Curly Kid was never more fully alert than right now, and he both sighted and recognized the comer at a glance, despite the comparative gloom where the portly banker then was.

Manning drew nearer, slackening his pace and making a half-covert sign to attract the attention of that lounging Sport, but without avail.

Through the open door leading into the hotel office he could catch glimpses of moving shapes, and now a couple of men came out upon the roofed porch, curiosity in their actions even as written upon their facts.

Again the banker signaled to the Sport, more plainly indicating his wish for an in-

terview, and still the Cherub declined to obey that silent summons, although he recognized it in words.

"That's all right, pardner! I'm half white and free born, and haven't learned how to run at any man's beck and nod."

"But—I merely wish to—"

"You owe me heap sight more than I owe you, Mr. Manning, so—if you really long for an interview, come to the mountain, Mahomet!"

This interchange of words had called attention their way, and Nathan Manning hesitated no longer, but advanced with hand in seemingly frank offering as he gained the veranda.

"I really owe you an apology, sir, and now that my temper has had time in which to moderate a bit, I've come back to offer both the apology and my hand. Will you accept them, both?"

"To prove it—shake!" cordially answered the Cherub, smiling genially as his sinewy fingers closed over that white hand.

"I couldn't rest until I'd made at least this much amends, sir," added the banker, each word falling with almost painful distinctness from his lips, the more surely to reach yonder curious ears and convince their owners that naught was to be won by waiting and watching.

"That's all right, my dear fellow. I can save, easy enough. You were all in a sweat over what had happened, and so—eh?"

"Pretty much that way, yes," admitted the banker; then adding in a whisper barely loud enough to reach those particular ears. "Please come with me: I've something of importance to broach, and yonder fools—"

Curly Kid lightly let both chair and feet down to a level, rising to his feet with a lazy stretch of both arms before drawling:

"Once for all, my dear fellow, that's all right! It just happened to come in my way, and so—save? I was nothing out, and you were a goodly boodle in! Now—I'm going to take a bit of a stroll down-town, sir, and if you like—"

"I'll bear you company as far as my quarters, with pleasure," said Manning, catching at the cue with easy grace.

There was nothing in all this to keep curiosity afire, and neither of those men who had so fondly anticipated a renewal of the "fun" between banker and Cherub, deemed it worth while to trouble them further.

When fairly away from the hotel, and satisfied that none were following upon their track, Nathan Manning slackened his pace, once more giving thanks for the recovery of his money.

Curly Kid withdrew the arm through which Manning had linked his own, and with cool directness spoke in turn:

"Out with it, pardner! That isn't what you coaxed me 'way off here for, and I know it!"

The more cautious banker cast a keen look around them before making reply, and even then his tone was barely above a whisper.

"I'd like to buy just such a man as you are, sir!"

"Live or dead weight?"

"Living, of course! What use—"

"Well, I didn't know but what you thought of starting a soap-factory, or something of that sort."

"You know better, sir, but—could it be done?"

"Buying, you mean? Well, I've seen it somewhere written that all men have a price-tag fastened to them, and I'm built pretty much that way. I reckon I'm for sale, if any fellow can bid high enough."

"What would you call high enough?"

"That depends pretty much on the use I'd be put to," coolly answered the Cherub, still with charming candor, speaking in his natural tones, despite the example set him by the portly banker.

"Sh-h-h!" came a hiss of warning from those lips as a more rapidly moving figure came within their range of vision. "Not so loudly, man! If anybody should hear you—"

"Why not, pray?" with real or affected surprise, arching his brows. "Surely you'd never mix up in aught you were afraid or ashamed to let all the world hear, Mr. Manning?"

The banker bowed to that passing citizen, whose steps slackened instinctively as those

couple were recognized; but then, as Manning gave a low, genial laugh, the man passed on.

Surely there was nothing going [wrong] where that laugh could live!

Curly Kid likewise laughed, soft and low, but it was at, not with the banker, who seemed more than ever at a loss how to gain his ends.

The Cherub saved him further trouble on that score, however, coolly uttering:

"Not quite the easy nut to crack you took me for, eh, Manning? Well, I owed you a bit of a set-back for your rough chatter a short time since, and that's my excuse. Now—I've done enough to reassert my injured dignity, and we'll get there in a bigger hurry!"

"If I only knew how to take you!"

"Let me take you—thus!" locking arms and turning away from the main street, entering one less likely to afford frequent interruption through passers-by.

It did not take long to reach a spot sufficiently secluded to satisfy them both, then Curly Kid released that arm and squarely faced the banker, bluntly asking:

"Now, who is it you want elegantly slaughtered, my lord?"

In spite of his more than commonly strong nerves, Nathan Manning flinched at this blunt query, looking almost nervously around as though fearful of eavesdroppers.

"I never—I didn't say—" he stammered, tongue strangely thick and clumsy just then.

The Cherub laughed softly, seeming to find food for mirth in that unusual exhibition, and as the banker, sharply stung by that laugh, turned upon him with clinched hands, he airily added:

"It's a mighty poor boss who spoils the tool he needs in his work, Mr. Manning, so—keep your linen on, and name your victim, please!"

"I never said there was to be a victim, did I?" the banker demanded in more natural tones, anger helping to restore the nerve he had lost for the instant in dealing with this human enigma.

"Not with your tongue, perhaps, but you surely did with your eyes, Mr. Manning. And so—what might her name be, pray?"

"Her name? Are you crazy, man?"

"Don't you fly away with that idea, my dear fellow, or you'll get left—get left bad, too! I merely felt a curiosity to learn who was the woman in this case: nothing more, I assure you, sir!"

"If you're not crazy, you're acting mightily like it. Or—like an idiot, if that horn better pleases you!" harshly retorted the banker.

"Getting hot under the collar, eh? Well, that's hardly the part of true wisdom, my dear fellow, but maybe it's constitutional with you? No? Then possibly I've said something that sticks crossways in your swallow. Is that it?"

"If you are trying to pick a row, sir—"

"I'd choose a far different subject if I was actually spoiling for a fight, and that's a fact, Mr. Manning! Time was when you might have put up a very pretty little show, but now—well, you're verging upon the sere and yellow, even though you can still play the gay Lothario!"

"I see I've made a mistake in my man, and so—good-night to you!"

"Steady, pardner!" quickly cut in the Cherub, lightly touching an arm as the banker turned away. "How can you trust a tool unless you fairly test it? And how can a tool know his master is fit to play guide, unless that testing process be reversed? So—I'm open to business, now!"

Nathan Manning swept a glance around, then bent a bit nearer.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BANKER TURNS SPORT.

In low, guarded tones he whispered, close to that attentive ear:

"How much would you ask to lay a man out for keeps, then?"

Curly Kid drew back a trifle, but there was nothing in his comely face to hint at either horror or offense as the clear light of the heavens fell across it.

He waited for a bit before making answer, gazing keenly into the face of his tempter like one striving to read the truth which might be written there.

"You said you were ready and open for business, didn't you?" demanded the banker, one hand stealing toward a hidden weapon as though he began to suspect the presence of a dangerous snare.

"And I meant just what I said, Mr. Manning," came the cool response. "I was merely trying to decide just how far you were in earnest, first."

"Would I ask such a question in jest?"

"That hardly looks reasonable, does it?" the starlight revealing a half-quizzical smile just then. "Then you are actually in need of a trusty hand, sir?"

"If so, do you carry that hand?"

"That depends, as I hinted before. And this enemy of yours. Martin Castle, for a guess! Am I right, pardner?"

"Suppose I were to say yes," still fencing like one not yet wholly convinced he might fully trust this adventurer.

"I'll answer that after you do say yes, pardner!"

"And if I say yes—if Martin Castle is really the man I wish you to remove, would you tackle him?"

"Why not? I'd tackle a heap sight better man: I'd tackle my own father if you could show me good and sufficient reasons for doing it!"

There was a blunt candor about this assertion which went far toward banishing those lingering doubts, and after another wary glance around them, Nathan Manning quickly added:

"Name your own price, then! Set your own figures, and if they are not entirely out of reason, I'll cry done!"

But Curly Kid drew back a bit to avoid the eager hand which came out to close that nefarious bargain, and in the same cool tones, but with a slightly different cadence, he spoke in turn:

"Steady, bo! Don't you overrun the leaders, pardner, or you'll find yourself in such a terrible tangle that it'll take a knife to cut your way out! And—begins to look as though you had made a mistake in the sort of tool I am, though!"

"What! Surely you don't—surely you said you wouldn't fear to tackle even the Crystal City Sport?"

"Fear? What's that? Anything good to eat?"

"If I really thought—I took you for a man!"

"Maybe I'm more of a man than you took me for, pardner!" lightly retorted the Cherub, evidently taking greater pleasure in that little sparring match than his adversary found.

"You owned up that you had your price, and so—"

"You took me for a professional bravo, eh? That's right where you made a mistake, sir! I'm not an angel, if I am called the Cherub! I'm not one whit better than the law allows, but—I never yet stooped so low as to stab a man in the back, or to strike a blow from under cover!"

Nathan Manning stood in fierce perplexity, plainly longing to cut that interview short, yet just as clearly at a loss how best to go about it now that the Cheyenne representative had flung aside his mask.

He was shrewd enough to know that he would be making a bad matter worse by trying to laugh it off or to gloss his offer over; Curly Kid was not one who could be blinded so easily.

And yet: was all lost? Was this fellow really in earnest, now?

There was some indefinite thing in his manner, his looks, his very tones that led up to this doubt, and even as he felt this, Manning found proof forthcoming!

"I never was a fellow to skulk under cover when there was work of that sort to be done," added the Cherub from Cheyenne, gently waving a hand that showed clean and strong in the first rays of the rising moon. "I never slugged another man in the dark, or from behind his back! I have yet to see the time I even pulled trigger on a fellow without giving him full and free warning. Still—"

"Name your own figures, man!" harshly repeated the banker, knowing that he could not make matters any worse by pressing that point home, and given a bit more courage by that emphatic break.

"Still—I might be content to pick a

quarrel with the hot-headed young gentleman," gravely continued the adventurer.

"What little I saw of him this evening rather impressed my fancy, but—business is business, and I'm its prophet!"

"Then make it pure business!" impatiently spoke up Manning, those fears brushed aside for good and all. "I don't care how you mask your motive, just so the work is thoroughly done! I want a certain obstacle removed from my path. For good and sufficient reasons I don't care to tackle the job myself, for—"

"It's safer to hire a tool, eh, pardner?"

The Cherub chuckled a bit at this quip, but the banker showed no signs of resentment as he grimly retorted:

"That's where you're off your base, my good fellow. If I prefer paying a tool to doing the work myself, it's not because I lack the necessary nerve. If ever you and I come together as adversaries, where one or the other must go down for good and all, you'll realize just that!"

"Is that so? Then I'd better keep off your toes, hadn't I?" half-mockingly uttered the adventurer.

"If you expect to wear gray hairs, I should say you ought; but that isn't what I brought you all the way out here to consider. Now—to solid business!"

"Let her flicker, pardner!"

"You bulk at laying a man out in cold blood, then?"

"I can't help it, pardner, for I was born that way. Make it worth my while, and I don't mind going a good bit out of my way to pick a quarrel with another chief, real or counterfeit, but—no professionalism for me—not any!"

The portly banker gave a short, dry laugh at this distinction without a difference, then spoke again:

"Every man to his own humor, sir, and—by the way, I haven't learned your real name?"

"Cummings—Horace Cummings, if you prefer lopping off the Cherub portion."

"All right, Mr. Cummings; that sounds a bit more natural on the lips of a man of business, such as I claim to be as a general thing. But for this one particular occasion, pray class me with yourself: just imagine me a thoroughbred Sport, and to make it more binding—listen!

"I'll let you five hundred dollars that Martin Castle, sometimes called the Crystal City Sport, will marry a certain young lady of this town, whose—"

"Whose name is—what?"

"Whose name need not be mentioned in this connection," quickly added the banker.

"Enough that the Sport is engaged to the lady, and that they fully expect to be united in bonds of matrimony."

"And you offer to bet that marriage will never eventuate?"

"Just the contrary, Mr. Cummings. If they marry, you lose your money if you take up with my offer. If anything should happen to prevent that wedding—if the bridegroom should never appear to claim his bride—you win my little stake!"

"If anything should happen, eh?" slowly muttered the Cherub, thoughtfully smoothing his heavy mustache as he gazed at the now visible moon. "And it's so powerful easy for things to happen, isn't it, pardner?"

"Wait a bit, please, for I'm still in sporting humor! Five hundred level that the Sport weds the lady! And a clean thousand more that Martin Castle lives to see the last day of this month!"

"There you have a double test for your boasted nerve, Mr. Cummings! Dare you accept it? Are you man enough to take me at my offer?"

Curly Kid showed neither resentment nor eagerness at that thinly-veiled bribe, but after a brief pause he spoke in cool, even tones:

"I've another little peculiarity, Mr. Manning, and that is never to offer a bet without having the money to back it up, and never to accept one unless the cash is in plain evidence. Have you that amount of hard rocks in your pockets, pray?"

"Of course not, but I have it in the bank, and my word—"

"All right, sir; we'll wait until banking hours, to-morrow," coolly retorted the Cher-

uh, shaking his shoulders like one casting off all thought of sober business for the time being.

Nathan Manning gave a start of uneasy suspicion, his voice less firm and self-reliant as he muttered, hoarsely:

"You'll not—this is all on honor, of course, sir?"

The Cherub gave an airy wave of the hand as though brushing aside all such ugly suspicions.

"Never let that doubt worry you, Mr. Manning. It's on honor, and you know what that amounts to. So—shake, and we'll meet again on the morrow!"

The Cheyenne Sport had to do all of the shaking, for Manning was far from at ease, and his fingers lay but limply in that warm palm. Yet he dared not show his doubts more plainly, lest this reckless fellow be tempted through pure love of deviltry to make those doubts still worse certainty.

As though he never missed that lack of cordiality, Curly Kid parted with the banker, and strolled idly back to the better lighted portion of the town, for the night was still very young, and he was naturally averse to early hours, so far as going to bed was concerned.

His was an aimless stroll, for he had no goal in view, no object in keeping afoot save the desire to pass off the time which might otherwise hang heavily upon his hands.

With this sole object, then, Mr. Cummings dropped in at several saloons, where cards divided the popularity with drink, but at each one of these resorts he came across citizens who immediately recognized him as the man who had played so prominent a part in the recent drama, and not feeling in the mood for being lionized just then, the Cherub as often shifted his position.

Finally he entered a larger, better appointed house of entertainment, the windows of which bore the gaudy letters

'THE ALHAMBRA,'

and here the Sport found the quiet he missed at the other places.

It was a combination of drinking and gambling saloon, as were nearly all establishments of that class, time and place considered. But here a heavy game of faro was under way, with the addition of several tables nearer the front entrance, which were devoted to short-card games.

At one of these tables the Cherub found a seat not so very long after entering the Alhambra; just long enough, in fact, to show him that he either was not recognized, or was deemed far less of a curiosity here than he had found himself at all other saloons that evening.

The little party Cummings joined were playing a modest game so far as stakes were concerned, and he quickly grew absorbed in the vagaries of fortune, for he really loved to play poker.

But that game was fated to be cut short after a startling fashion, for with the slightest of warnings, a reckless rider rushed in at the wide entrance, closely followed by other armed ruffians!

CHAPTER XV.

WITH THE CHERUB'S COMPLIMENTS.

"WAH-HAH! Yah—yah—yah—whoop!" yelled the wild rider as he lifted his horse to a half leap, half-plunge to fairly crush a card table to splinters beneath those iron-shod hoofs, the players tumbling endlong in their frantic efforts to escape that hairy avalanche.

"Whoop-hah! Hy-yah! Hy-yah!" howled his no less reckless followers as they came trampling in through the front entrance, more like a pack of human wolves on a raid than aught less harmful.

With cries and exclamations of alarm, the players abandoned their games, scattering cards and even money in their frantic haste.

Curly Kid found himself abandoned by those with whom he had joined in play almost before he had time to turn his head far enough to catch a fair glimpse of the wild disturbants; and then, as that plunging steed came down to its natural level in the midst of the ruin it had wrought, the harsh voice of its rider rung forth again, but now in articulate speech.

"Whar is he? Whar's the dirty whelp as hails from Cheyenne? Stan' up an' be counted fer—hey! Come to Limerick, you devil!"

He caught sight of the well-dressed Cherub, still sitting at that card-table, and as though recognition was instant, he gave that harsh call, jerking forth a huge revolver to—

But even more swiftly moved and acted the Cherub from Cheyenne, who was already pushing back his chair and slipping a hand inside his garments, where hung a revolver from a shoulder-belt.

The lamplight was caught by the plated tube, but a still brighter flash came from the black muzzle even as Curly Kid sprung to his feet, and with a savage howl of mingled rage and pain, the desperado dropped the gun from his cruelly-shattered fingers.

With a barely perceptible difference between the two, another shot rung forth as a second thug recognized the Cherub, but the Sport ducked as swiftly, and the lead passed harmlessly over his head; ducked to rise again with two legs of that card-table gripped by fingers of steel.

As though it weighed no more than the finger-soiled bits of painted pasteboard which flew flutteringly about, the heavy table rose aloft and then came whirling through the air, to strike both horse and rider, accompanied by the clear, taunting cry:

"With the Cherub's compliments, gentlemen!"

The rider cursed, the horse plunged and kicked, falling back upon its mates, casting all into still wilder confusion, for the moment, while Horace Cummings darted across the apartment and rose from the floor in a ball-like mass, shooting straight for one of the side windows.

He shot out his feet, striking the wooden sash, true to his aim, opening a passage for his person, plunging through the window amidst the loud crash and jingle of splintering wood and glass.

Other and still sterner sounds were added to that clatter, for it was clear enough those roughs had raided the Alhambra expressly to take or slay the human sensation of the hour, and guns began to crack even as the Cherub hurled his unique "compliments" at the head of their now crippled chief.

Plaster flew in little puffs as those bullets spent their force, but more than one passed through that ruined window in perilously close company with Curly Kid, though none of those who took the hasty snap-shots could be certain whether he who vanished so suddenly from view was living or dead.

Curly Kid struck the ground in safety, feet foremost, though he had no means of knowing what sort of reception he would meet with when he made that blind leap, but 'twas his one slender chance, and once again good fortune stood his friend.

The ground proved to level and comparatively smooth, just there. Cummings plunged forward upon his hands and knees, but as quickly recovered, to spring away at a sharp angle which almost instantaneously carried him out of the moonlight and into the shadow of the nearest building.

Taking barely time enough for a sweeping glance along that moonlighted space to make certain that he had nothing to fear just then from that quarter, the Cherub crouched down, with pistol coming forth for use if needed.

From the Alhambra came wild and reckless uproar, men yelling and toughs cursing, horses neighing and hoofs clattering upon hollow floor, powder burning either in mad earnest or blustering intimidation.

From the front of the saloon came sounds which told the listener all honest customers who had the power left them were rushing outside in hot haste; but a low, grim exclamation broke from the Cherub's lips as he formed his own conclusions.

"More bluff than bloodshed, more bluster than business!" he muttered to himself as he rose erect, casting a swift, keen look around like one who strives to locate himself, or decide upon a certain point of a none too familiar compass. "There's more than this chicken in the mix, else they'd never have made a clumsy break like—The roper, for all the rocks I saved this day!"

All mental mists seemed to dissipate as he

recalled the location of the building in which Jack Lawson had found temporary confinement, and keeping well inside that friendly shadow until he placed that building fairly between the Alhambra and himself, Curly Kid hurried away to confirm or confound his suddenly-born suspicions.

At first he had taken all that wild raid as a personal compliment, possibly by a portion of the Clean-up Gang, who had determined to punish him for his audacious trickery of the day just spent; but now he held a different opinion.

"If I was all they wanted, why delay so long in jumping after me?" formed a portion of his swift reasoning as he hurried away through moonlight and shadow. "Why keep up such an infernal racket in yonder, unless they had to cover some more important move? And that—to save their own necks by pulling the roper out of the noose!"

It was swift and sure reasoning, and the Cherub knew as much when he covered sufficient ground to win his earliest glimpse of the little shanty which had been turned into a temporary jail for Lawson's benefit; but he was a little too late to prevent the rescue he anticipated.

He himself had paid that make-shift jail a brief visit after his supper, and before the coming of Nathan Manning. He had seen the roper in bonds, with a couple of sturdy citizens standing guard over the closed and locked door; but now—

"I knew it!" grimly muttered the Cherub as he caught sight of several figures in motion directly in front of that jail. "They've got the rascal, and—I pity the poor guards!"

In spite of the shadows which there mingled with the moonshine, the Cherub made out horses as well as human beings, and he crept silently nearer as he saw those saddles filled.

With brief delay the horsemen moved away from the rifled jail, heading for the hills in evident flight, yet not daring to break into a gallop lest inconvenient notice be drawn that way.

Curly Kid paused irresolute for an instant, glancing from those moving shapes over a shoulder in the direction of the Alhambra saloon, where that mad uproar still reigned; but then his resolution was taken, and as he sprung into motion once more, he grimly muttered:

"That's my meat you're trying to get away with, gentlemen. Play fair, or you may have to pay a double price for—steady, Curly!"

He was hurrying along in the same direction taken by those indistinctly seen shapes when he came to the edge of a broad band of moonlight unbroken by any effective cover. And just then he caught sight of mounted men at a halt no great distance ahead.

Softly as a bit of the shadow himself the Cherub sunk to the ground, right where his steps had been so suddenly arrested, hand on pistol as he peered keenly ahead.

If they had heard or sighted him, yonder knaves made no sign. They seemed rather to be listening to those wild sounds raised nearer the center of the town, and from one of the quartette—for Curly Kid now had time and opportunity to count his men—came a coarse laugh, followed by a brief sentence which failed to reach those listening ears.

An instant later the horsemen resumed their cautious retreat, and now feeling fairly confident that his espial was wholly unsuspected, the Cherub from Cheyenne stole swiftly across that moonlighted space, bending low and keeping close watch of his game beyond.

He was ready to spring to the nearest cover in case they made any hostile movement, but nothing of that sort came to pass, and once more he dogged their heels, keeping himself well covered.

Thanks to the lay of the ground, it took but a brief space for the rescuers to win clear of the town, passing the outskirts without so much as cry or shot giving warning to Crystal City what a bold trick was being played.

Again a halt was made, but now Curly Kid had ample cover at hand, and feeling confident that the enemy had no suspicion of his playing the spy over their movements,

he stole close enough to their position to not only mark each rider, but to catch their words as well.

It was as he thought: three of these fellows had played the role of rescuers to the captured lasso-thrower, for the fourth man was just as certainly Jack Lawson, ex-cowboy and hard case in general!

"Sounds like they were piling one-half the town on top of the other, then kicking the whole caboodle down again!" was the first entire sentence caught by the bold spy as he came to a halt under a scrubby bush only a few yards distant from the four horsemen.

"If they only find that tricky devil!" harshly exclaimed the roper, with a gesture which told how dearly he would love to play a prominent part in what ought to follow that finding.

"If they have, he's cold meat before this, and you know it, Jacky! Listen, man! They're on the move—hear that?"

"Yes, but—it's not coming our way, though!"

He who had spoken first broke into an audible laugh before saying:

"Of course not, man! Why would they? The boss told 'em to cover our bit of a trick, and so—they're making West, while we're for the East!"

Curly Kid came to the same conclusion.

That racket still lasted, though less loud than it had been at first, and somehow gave the impression that at least a portion of the noise came from the citizens who had been aroused by that bold raid.

"If I only knew—you said they meant to locate the Cherub before turning loose, didn't you, pardner?"

"Yes, and file a mineral claim upon his carcass as well!" came the swift answer. "Now—judge for yourself, Jacky! The boys are moving off just opposite to our course, and that means—they've got their meat, and are now laying a false trail to cover up our tracks; see?"

"I'd give a finger to be dead sure of it, but—which way, we?"

"To wait for the rest of the outfit of course. Come, lads; the fun is so nearly over that it's hardly worth our while to linger here. We have time to spare before us, but it'll be easier waiting at the rendezvous than sitting a cold saddle here!"

As he uttered this brisk speech, the fellow who seemed to be taking the lead so far as that portion of the gang was concerned, touched up his nag and rode away, face to the hills and back turned upon Crystal City.

"I'm coming, and you don't want to forget it, neither!" muttered the spy as he resumed his pursuit at once. "I'm coming, tail-on-end, pardner!"

CHAPTER XVI.

CURLY KID MAKES A CLEAN SWEEP.

JACK LAWSON seemed inclined to linger a bit, looking back toward the town where he had so signally come to grief that evening and where he was trying to picture the fate of the bold stranger who had brought about that downfall.

"Come on, you fool!" harshly commanded the leader, once more.

Jack Lawson obeyed without a word, but a low, grim chuckle found birth only a little nearer the town, and as he stole forward silently as though but a shadow of the night, the spy murmured:

"Oh, I'm coming, never you fear, my hearty! I'm coming, and I'm Curly Kid, the Cherub from Cheyenne! I'm coming, and if you value me as one of a whole litter, you'll get fooled—fooled badly, too! I was born on purpose, and part of that purpose is—shall I take you all in a lump, or merely reclaim my meat you're running off?"

From most lips that would have been but a bit of foolish brag, but coming from those of Horace Cummings, it sounded almost natural.

Showing no very great haste, yet pressing on through the night at a fair pace, the quartette left Crystal City further behind them.

It was still possible to catch an occasional sound from that direction, but they seemed to have full faith in their mates, and borrowed no worry over aught going wrong at that end of the line.

As for Curly Kid, he had his work cut out for him, and room for no outside thoughts; difficult enough for him to keep certain track of the quartette without at the same time running too great risk of his espial being suspected.

Just now he would have preferred the absence of yonder nearly full moon, for while it showed him what to avoid, it also doubled his risk of being discovered through a backward glance from yonder eyes.

Luckily for him, however, none of that little party seemed to dream of such pursuit. Why should they, after having rescued their imprisoned mate and won fairly clear of the town without aught arising to block their path or show that their little job had been discovered as yet?

For reasons which, no doubt, were far more satisfactory to themselves than they proved to be in the estimation of Curly Kid, that rendezvous had been laid at an unconscionable distance from Crystal City.

More than once the Cherub was half-inclined to throw it up as a bad job, or else to bring matters to a focus by calling a halt at the muzzle of his guns; but as often he checked that temptation, pressing doggedly on after his human prey.

"Who is the fellow who keeps his tongue so close curbed?" the spy asked himself, trying the best he could to solve those annoying doubts whenever the horsemen passed into the bright moonlight. "Can it be—surely not the boss? Surely not—Martin Castle?"

That doubt haunted him strangely throughout that dangerous trip, and had much to do with prolonging that espial; for in one of the rescuers, whose slouch hat fairly masked his features in that indistinct light, Curly Kid found a strong resemblance to both Captain Clean-up and the Crystal City Sport, so far as shape, size and general carriage went.

His doubts were still unsolved when, long after leaving Crystal City out of sight and hearing, a halt was called and the horsemen dismounted, their after actions plainly proving that they had at length reached the appointed place of meeting.

Curly Kid kept himself at a respectful distance until after the horses were tied by their masters, and the ruddy glow of a small but cheery fire began to make itself both seen and felt.

Seeming wholly at their ease so far as danger of interruption from enemies was concerned, the four men squatted or sprawled upon the ground by the fire, talking and laughing, all save Jack Lawson seeming to be in the very best of spirits.

Eager to settle his doubts one way or the other, Curly Kid stole as close to the party as he dared, doubling himself up behind a scrubby bush at the foot of which grew a few blades of coarse grass.

From here he could win a fair view of three faces; but the one in which he felt by far the strongest interest, just then, still baffled his eyes.

That shape was a perfect match for either Captain Clean-up, or for Martin Castle, so far as Cummings could judge. And the voice, heard only in one or two brief sentences, might easily serve for either, to his notion. Yet—if he would only shift his position a trifle!

While the spy was worrying himself over this vague yet actual resemblance, Jack Lawson was being chaffed by the leader for his unusual glumness.

"Why, man, dear, a body'd think you were being yanked to the gallows in place of just the contrary! What is it that's gnawing you, Jacky?"

"Isn't it enough, then?" moodily growled the roper, as he sat with chin supported upon joined palms, staring into the fire. "Just a weenty bit ago I was a clean white man, free of the town and standing 'way up in the eyes of an honest little woman—you know who, pardner!"

"Well, she'll never throw you over for a bit of a slip like this!"

"You bet she will, too! She's clean white, and she won't have anything to do with a fellow who's—devil roast that scoundrel, I say!"

"He's stirring up his hottest fire for that very roast, Jacky!" the other knave declared, with a low, amused laugh. "The boys

never made a botch of their work, any more than we did of ours. And the boss—"

"Who is the boss, anyway?" bluntly asked another, big in every way, unless it might be in honesty! "Of course I turned my trick under his lead, but—who is Captain Clean-up?"

"Don't you know?" asked the smaller fellow, with an echo of surprise coming into his voice.

"No, I don't know! Would I be asking you to tell if I did know?" irritably said the big fellow, rising to a sitting posture, his heavily bearded face plainly betraying his strong curiosity.

Curly Kid leaned a bit further forward, almost shoving his head through that frail screen in his eagerness to catch every word that might fall from those tantalizing lips.

For the rascal was smilingly delaying his answer, finding pleasure in mocking this, his far more bulky companion.

"Neither do I know!" he said, after a pause, ending with a light laugh as he curved an arm before head and face as though to fend off an expected blow.

"Augh! quit your chaffing, man! Who is the captain, now?"

"Upon my word I can't tell you, pardner!" and now there was no sign of idle jesting in either face or voice. "I only wish I knew, myself, but hope I may die if I do know, any more than the rest of you!"

"Honest, now?"

"Cross my heart and kiss the book—honest!"

"All right. Maybe we'll grow wiser as we grow older, but—the boss plays it mighty slick, for a fact!"

The big fellow rose to his feet, giving his massive arms a wide and broad stretch, yawning as though he had been losing sleep of late.

"Where you going, baby?" asked the other, as the giant turned back to the fire with lazy step.

"Over to the spring for a drink. I'm dry as a lime-kiln, somehow!"

"Don't take too much, darling, or it'll poison you! You're not used taking your water straight, you know!" mockingly cried the lesser knave.

But Curly Kid felt far less amused, just then, for the big fellow was striding directly toward the scrubby bush which alone covered his person from view of yonder eyes, and that meant almost certain discovery!

Instinctively his hand closed upon a heavy chunk of quartz lying at his side, and as the big fellow actually put out a hand to idly grasp the top of that bush, Curly Kid rose up, striking as he came!

Fairly between the eyes that heavy stone smote the outlaw, sending him reeling back with wildly quivering arms, to fall at full length, much as falls a decaying stub before the wind!

Even as he dealt that blow, the Cherub relaxed his grip upon that stone and jerked forth his revolver, covering the other toughs as they sprung to their feet, amazed and taken all aback.

"Steady, all of you!" sternly cried the Cherub as he caught the drop. "Steady, or I'll shoot—to kill!"

He had them foul, and they knew it. Even Jack Lawson, who turned ghastly pale as he recognized the same man who had wrought his downfall a few hours earlier, stood like one turned to stone, not daring to grasp a weapon lest he so provoke a death-shot!

"Now, hands up, one and all!" sternly commanded the Cherub as he moved closer to his game. "I'll lift the roof of the fool who even thinks of snatching for a gun! Hands up—so!"

Mechanically the three knaves lifted their hands at full length above their heads, facing those weapons with reluctance, yet not daring to even flinch an inch.

"Steady, all!" repeated Curly Kid as he slowly moved around toward their rear, all the time keeping them carefully covered. "I mean little old business, now, and—steady, or I'll kill you like wolves!"

While speaking he reached out with one hand to remove the weapons from their belts, slipping his second revolver into its scabbard for the time being; but just as he touched the first man, his mate whirled

swiftly with a vicious stroke intended for the Cherub.

Swifter still spoke that revolver, and the fellow fell like a log, while Curly Kid struck Jack Lawson to earth with a fierce thrust of his steel-like fist, then harshly cried out as he held the last road-agent fairly lined:

"Act sensible, you, or I'll kill you as a starter! Bind those fools, and do your work up in clean style, or—lively, now!"

Thoroughly cowed, the fellow obeyed, working with nimble if not entirely willing fingers, though he shrank and shivered as Curly Kid bade him tackle the fellow who had dropped so limply at the crack of his gun.

"Bah! you fool! Can't you see he's only creased? contemptuously explained the Cherub. "Would I cheat the hangman, think? Truss him up in good shape, for there's another patient over yonder who needs a touch of your quieting art!"

The big fellow was treated next, and only awoke to life after his arms were firmly bound behind his back, and Curly Kid had the fourth and last member of the squad under his own knee!

The Cherub from Cheyenne rose up with a light laugh as he tied the last knot, giving a nod of approval as he surveyed the field.

"Not so bad as it might be, is it, gentlemen?" he spoke, in fairly pardonable glee. "Made a clean sweep for once! And—"

A vicious curse came from the lips of the rorer as Jack Lawson made a desperate effort to burst his bonds, then scrambled clumsily to his feet, only to go down again through a deft kick on an ankle from a foot of the Cherub, who said:

"Stay put, will you, old fellow? You roped me, once, and I've sworn to rope you—by the neck, up a tree! Don't make me out a liar by forcing me to lift your roof; now don't, I really implore you!"

"Curse you! I'll play even if it takes me a year!"

"That's all right, pardner, and you can begin studying up the how and when just as soon as you like. As for me—well, it's a long and lonely ride from this to Crystal City, so I reckon I'll take you along with me as company! And—might as well pray that none of your gang happens to run across us, for if they do, I'll blow a tunnel through every man-jack of you four!"

So speaking, the Cherub turned away to bring up the horses.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TEMPTER AND HIS TOOL.

IT would hardly be true to say that Nathan Manning was in love with himself or his surroundings when he parted company with the Cherub from Cheyenne after that moonlight interview.

His first summing up had put Curly Kid Cummings down as one of those wild, graceless free lances far more common in earlier days of lawless mining-camps, yet still occasionally to be met with: a fellow wholly without fear, without conscience, ready to bow to the highest bidder and never stop to ponder the deed just so the reward was large enough.

But now?

"Does he really mean it, or has the infernal scoundrel simply been playing me for a sucker?"

Boiled down, that was the ugly doubt which made the usually bland and smiling countenance of the banker look so dark and surly just then.

As he turned a corner on his way to his rooms, Nathan Manning came face to face with a briskly moving person, who gave a crisp ejaculation as he came to a halt, hand going forth as he spoke:

"Just the man I wanted to see above all others, Manning!"

The banker had recoiled a bit at that encounter, but he rallied in an instant, his portly figure growing more erect as he coldly spoke, paying no attention to the proffered hand:

"In a hurry to make your excuses, I suppose, Mr. Dickson?"

A low, prolonged whistle came from those other lips, and clasping hands behind his back, spreading his legs apart, cocking head on one side as though admiring a special ex-

hibition, the dare-devil Sport barred the way for the minute.

"Is that your latest scheme, Nathan Manning?" he asked, with half-sneer, half-menace underlying his words. "Running a little game of bluff on a fellow, eh? Well—maybe you'll make it pay out, and maybe you'll make an infernal mess of it, pardner!"

"You've set me a glorious example in that line, at any rate," the banker retorted, lowering his tones a bit as he flashed a quick look around them. "You had to make a nasty mix of it all, even after I'd put the whole thing into fair trim!"

"Satan scorch the hound who bilked us all!" fiercely fumed the Sport, losing that feigned airiness and letting out a glimpse of his vicious nature. "If I'd only dreamed of his playing such an infernally bold trick! If I had only—"

"Why didn't you, then?" harshly cut in the banker, hand dropping heavily upon an arm of his ally as he added: "Why take any chances at all, Lucky?"

"How was I to know?" surlily muttered the other knave, shaking his arm free from that touch. "His nag scented us out, and so—was I to let him run ahead and risk his warning the hearse?"

"If you had to take chances at all, why not make sure? Why not stop his tongue with bullet or steel, and—"

It was Dickson's turn to fling forth a hand, and it fell heavily upon Manning's shoulder, cutting his harsh speech short.

The Sport moved a trifle closer, his eyes seeming to glow and burn as they looked straight into the eyes of his opposite.

"Go a bit easy, Mr. Manning," he said in colder, harder tones, yet still keeping caution in view, and speaking only loud enough for those ears to catch his full meaning. "I didn't block your path just now to make a talk of this sort, but since you've said so much, maybe it's just as well that we both say a little more."

"I don't care to quarrel with you, Dickson."

"Nor I with you until I've got my pay for hard work done."

"Botched, not done!"

"Go easy, please, Mr. Manning," coldly cut in the Sport, with something very like a threat underlying both speech and manner. "You can't afford to mix in a row with me, even though you felt that way, and you know it."

"I know that—"

"That I've been playing cat to your monkey long enough? Just what notion I felt boring its way through my thick skull!" declared Lucky Dickson, with a short, grim chuckle.

"This is neither time nor place for such talk, Dickson. Wait until we can meet—"

"Pay me my pay, then, Manning."

"Before you've fairly earned it, man?"

"That's all right, pardner," with a touch of sulkiness coming into his voice. "I've done work enough to more than cover all the ducats you hung up before my hungry eyes, and now—Why, confound you! Haven't I daubed Mart Castle all over with black paint, so mighty thick his own mother wouldn't recognize her pet kid?"

Manning seemed disagreeably affected by that change of tone, and as though he began to see the prudence of hedging a bit, he muttered:

"I haven't said I wouldn't pay you, have I, Lucky? But, surely, you are white enough to earn your wages! And Castle ought to be growing cold and stiff, with his infernal neck in a noose by this."

"Why didn't you take him for the rope, then, when he stood off the whole town, you thrown in to make weight?"

"I believe you formed one of that crowd, didn't you, Lucky?" dryly asked the banker, and then joined in the brief laugh which came from the gambler's lips at that retort.

That laugh seemed to clear the atmosphere. In good sooth, neither man felt like pushing the quarrel to an end just then, and where both sides are willing, it is easy enough to effect a compromise.

"We're not going to clapperjaw each other over a few dollars," declared the banker in more placable tones, though a clearer light than that afforded by the moon might have told tales as to his actual sentiments. "If you are hard run for ready

cash, I'm willing enough to chip in, but you can hardly look for the full amount while your work remains undone."

"You can't fairly blame me, Manning."

"That's all right, Dickson, if you only think so. We agreed not to quarrel over what's past; but here is my offer:

"I'll pay you the full amount agreed upon the moment you can prove past all doubting that your work is thoroughly finished. Or, if you prefer to have it so, I'll pay you a portion now, and look to this new Chief from Cheyenne for the wind-up."

"Satan toast him on a pitchfork!"

"With you for a helper? Well, after you've finished your contract with me, Lucky, I'm willing you should tackle the Cherub for revenge; only, better catch him foul, or you may have a couple of letters bunched on to the front end of your handle, Dickson!"

"Does that mean you're thinking to throw me over in his favor, Nathan Manning?"

"Not unless you make me do that through proving yourself a failure as a tool," coolly returned the banker. "Of course I expect clean work for the wages I pay, and so—understand?"

"What more do you expect me to do, then?"

"What I have already paid you a fistful of gold to begin, and when I stand ready to double that amount when your task is finished, am I asking too much?"

"You're talking too much, anyway," surlily interrupted the gambler with an impatient gesture. "In one word, what do you want me to do first?"

"To nab Martin Castle!"

"You had him brought right to your front door, yet let him go! You had by far the biggest half of the town on your side, ready to kill or to hang at your lightest word, yet you let the Sport go scot-free!"

"Am I to pay for a pack of hounds, and still do my own barking?"

"Is it too much to expect you to bring down the game when those hounds drive it right up to the muzzle of your gun, though?" shrewdly retorted the gambler.

Manning made an impatient gesture as he said:

"That's like thrashing over old straw, Dickson, and matters have reached a point where neither you nor I can well afford to waste time which might be so much better employed."

"In just what way?"

"In finishing work so well begun, of course! We've got the advantage over Castle, just now, if we improve our time as we ought; but if we palter and play the fool—well, he'll go up as we go down!"

"He's already gone, hasn't he?"

"Yes: gone to see what hand Ace Conway played in this ugly mix," Manning said, with a half-chuckle; then adding in swift, stern tones: "Why can't you jump him, Lucky, either there or on his way back to town?"

"He'll never risk coming back after the escape he's made."

Nathan Manning gave a surly growl at this, making a vicious gesture as he muttered in husky tones:

"Yes, he will come back—if let! He'll come back, for there's a pull at his heart-strings strong enough to—curse the hound!"

"You mean the Waller girl?" asked the gambler, with curiosity in face as in voice. "If that's so—"

"I mean that now's your chance to earn your money, if ever!" sternly interrupted the banker, moving a bit closer to his tool as he spoke on: "He's gone hot-foot to see his pard, Conway, in hopes of getting more light on the subject, and you can find him there if you don't cut too much time to waste."

"And if I should find him?"

"Make no mistake this time!"

As he spoke, Nathan Manning leaned forward far enough to tap one of the revolvers which the gambler bore. Dickson nodded his comprehension, but, like one who wishes no room left for future disputes, he asked:

"You mean to croak him, Manning?"

"Yes! If he never comes back to clear his name, all the world will believe him the notorious Captain Clean-up, and that—that is precisely what I've been playing for!"

"He'll make a mighty tough fight of it, pardner! He's desperate to a degree, afert

the way you branded him before the whole town! It's a job well worth paying for, don't you reckon?"

"We've already agreed upon what the job's worth," impatiently said the tempter. "The main point is for you to fairly earn your money, and to do that—Listen, will you?"

"Out with it, since you're so durned cranky!"

"You'll take a couple or three fellows whom you can thoroughly trust, if you think you need help. If you prefer, go it alone. Either way, you want to hit the trail for Ace Conway's shack in a holy hurry!"

"And then?"

"Find Martin Castle, either there or on his way back here: you can't well miss him if you strike the trail, after leaving the stage road, before he gets that far back. And when you find him—lose him for all time to come!"

"That part's easy enough, but how about the after-clap?" slowly asked the gambler. "A man like Mart Castle can't be shoved into a ditch for a grave without some fool friend kicking up an infernal row, and then—you understand?"

"I've thought of all that, too!" quickly assured the banker. "I've thought of all that, and it'll be an addition to your wages if you aid me in carrying my plans to the end, Dickson."

"What are they, first?"

"First, you must put Castle out of the way: put him where he'll never come to light again, either living or as a corpse!"

"Oh, I'll make sure he's past kicking, don't you worry over that part of the job," bluntly assured the tool. "What worries me a heap sight more is this: how are you going to keep his friends from poking into the case?"

"Like, this," quickly answered the banker, first flashing a keen glance around, then bending a bit closer to his tool. "You'll croak the scoundrel, putting his carcass where it can never tell tales. Then you will lay a false trail in three separate places: we can fully decide upon all that, though, later on."

"You mean that I'm to play Captain Clean-up again?"

"Not exactly, though something like it," with a short chuckle as his strong white hands rubbed together at the fancy. "You will play Martin Castle, of course!"

"But—my make-up wouldn't pass muster among his friends, for anything more than a passing glimpse. You know that, Manning!"

"That passing glimpse will be plenty, backed up as it shall be by still solid proofs, Lucky! I'll see to the evidence; all you'll have to do is to scatter it along the trail I map out, and then—when all the world believes Martin Castle is fleeing in search of fresh pastures as well as to escape the reward he won as Captain Clean-up, you'll come back to me and take your pay; pay enough to set you up in style, Lucky!"

"Agreed!" said Dickson, gripping hand and shaking it heartily. "I'm off, now, to earn my pay! Get your fist way down in that money-chest of yours, old man, for I'm going to strike you heavy—you bet I am, now!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CUNNINGLY BAITED TRAP.

MARTIN CASTLE flung Asa Conway aside with as much apparent ease as though the athletic miner had been but an infant; but in his own blind rage against the enemy who had so vilely blackened his prospects, he lost a few seconds in fumbling for the doorfastening, and Conway had time to rally again.

With a grip which would not be shaken off he clung to an arm while begging his friend to take a second and cooler thought.

"You're not fit to go back and face them all down, Mart, and you know it! Wait until—wait until you have grown cooler, at any rate?"

"Will waiting wipe off the filth those devils flung all over me? I was a fool to bolt off here, giving them so much more time in which to clinch those lying tales! Don't hold me, pard! I'm going—I'm going to force the whole truth out of that infernal

scoundrel, or else cram that lying tongue down his own throat!"

"All right, then, and I'm going with you, pardner," said Conway, realizing his inability to do aught better than that. "I'll back you up, old man, and if we can't clean out the whole town, we'll make it mighty interesting while the circus lasts, anyway!"

Castle stopped short in the open doorway at this, turning with a new trouble showing itself in his pale but still handsome face.

"No you won't, Conway. It's enough for me to—you can't do any good the way matters now stand, and I'll not consent to your getting mixed up in my scrape—never!"

"How are you going to help yourself?" doggedly spoke the miner, as he jerked on his heavy boots, then reached out for his belt of arms which hung at the head of his rude bunk. "I say I'm going along. If not right with you, then at your heels!"

Castle frowned impatiently, too ill at rest just then to fairly appreciate the devotion thus displayed.

"What's the use, Conway? You've only the burro to ride, and I'm in too big a hurry to wait. You can't do me any good if the whole town jumps on my back, and if not—well, I'm man enough to handle Nathan Manning, I hope!"

"It'll be mighty nigh day-dawn before you can get to town, Mart, and an hour more or less won't count," persisted Conway as he buckled his belt and caught up his hat and saddle. "And—I'm going with or tagging, that's flat!"

Martin Castle was already across the threshold, making his way toward the rude shelter where his horse was chumming with a long-eared, shaggy-haired burro.

Leading forth his nag, the Crystal City Sport sprung into saddle with nervous haste, the fidgeted uneasily while Conway prepared his burro for the road.

"You can't make it, pardner!" he broke out, impatiently, as the miner had to shove the sluggish animal around by main force. "Stay here, that's a sensible fellow! I'm going to— Curse that Manning! It sets me on fire just to think—"

The vicious rake of a spur sent the good horse away at reckless speed, its rider paying no heed to the half-angry, half-appealing calls sent after him by the miner pard.

It was with a mind filled with dark and gloomy thoughts that Martin Castle rode away in the direction of Crystal City, now urging his tired steed on with voice and steel, now letting the animal pick its difficult way at will while he vainly groped through the mental mists which had settled so thickly over all.

He tried to recall all that had been spoken there on the street before he made his dash for liberty, but only one point stood out with anything like clearness: the ugly fact that he stood charged with being the infamous road-agent, Captain Clean-up!

If Nathan Manning had been the only one to declare him the outlaw, he could have set it all down to personal hatred, through jealousy; but the banker had openly called upon others, two at least of whom had long been warm friends of his, to bear witness that they also had recognized that exposed face: the face of Captain Clean-up, yet his face as well!

He thought of a double, but even there he was wholly at a loss. He could not recall a single face in all Crystal City which might by any possibility be mistaken for his own.

"It must be that way, or Paul Gordon would never think 'twas me he saw! But—who? Who? Oh, it's enough to turn a sane man crazy!"

Martin Castle was still trying to solve the ugly mystery which had fallen over his fortunes like a black and smothering pall, when he was startled from those ponderings by a sound from no great distance in advance.

He tightened reins and peered keenly through those mingling lights and shadows, hand resting upon pistol-butt as he listened:

A brief pause, then a human voice came to his ears:

"Hello, there! Is that you, Castle?"

Swift as thought the Crystal City Sport drew his gun and turned muzzle in that direction, for just then he caught an indistinct view of at least one horseman at the edge of a belt of moonlight.

"Who calls?" he cried out in stern tones,

now thoroughly aroused and ready for action. "Talk white, and talk mighty quick, too!"

"We're true friends, Castle, so don't shoot!" came the instant response. "To prove it—see!"

The speaker moved out into the clear moonlight, then halted his horse, sitting in the saddle with both hands empty and held above his head in token of friendship.

"You, is it, Dickson?" called out Martin Castle as he recognized the gambler. "Who's with you, and what are you hunting for out here?"

"Only a couple of good fellows, Castle, and we're hunting for what we've found; your own sweet self, pardner!"

"Finding isn't taking, though, if that's what you mean, and—"

"Steady, my dear fellow!" quickly cried the gambler, still keeping his unarmed hands plainly in evidence. "Don't you trump the wrong trick when you need to make the best of every card you hold, if you expect to win your game!"

"What is it you're hunting me for, then?" still suspicious, still holding the drop. "Talk straight, pardner, for I've had my share of dirty dealing, and—"

"Don't I know just that?" heartily cut in the gambler. "And isn't it mainly because you have been played all over dirt that I'm taking so much trouble to hurry you the news? Good news, too!"

"What news do you mean, Lucky?"

"The best and biggest news Crystal City ever had piled on top of her all in a heap; and you, kick up your heels and crow for glory, man, dear! Fill your lungs and cough up a yell to split the heavens above our heads this blessed minutel!"

"Are you crazy, man?"

"Am I? Well, if not just crazy, I'm so glad—we've laid him out too cold for skinning, pardner!"

"Laid who out? What in blazes are you trying to get through you, anyway, Lucky Dickson?" impatiently demanded Castle, moving forward and lowering the weapon, which he no longer expected to use, just then.

"Captain Clean-up has croaked, pardner! Laid out as cold meat, and—"

"What! You can't mean that, man alive?" hoarsely cried Castle, his face flushing redly, then turning pale as though he himself was a corpse.

"But I just do mean it, pardner!" declared the cunning trickster, as he tightly gripped that trembling hand—trembling with excitement, not through fear or weakness. "He jumped the town with a gang, thinking to rescue the fellow who tried to rope you—Jack Lawson, you know?"

"I know! Never mind him! The—It's dead true, partner?"

"Dead as the captain is dead, pardner! And I not only saw him turned toes up, but I helped put him into that highly interesting condition. And then—Well, I thought of you, and straddled horse to be first with the glad tidings."

Again Martin Castle wrung that treacherous hand, too strongly agitated to do more than mutter a few husky thanks. Then, giving himself a vigorous shake, he added:

"It seems too mighty good news to be true! I'll never be able to think it isn't a mistake until after—Come! I want to see as well as hear!"

He gave his horse free rein, but almost as quickly tightened it again, to keep from leaving behind him that bearer of such glad tidings.

"We're ready for the back-track, pardner, but don't make us break our precious necks in doing a steeple-chase where—I just dote on a race-track like this!"

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said the Crystal City Sport, with a courtesy which deserved double credit under the circumstances. "If you only knew what a hell I've been in for the past few hours, you'd know better how to make allowance for my impatience to—Dead? And it is the truth, Dickson?"

"The truth, solid as a rock and big as a mountain, pardner!" jovially cried the gambler, as he steadied his horse after that awkward stumble, moving closer to the side of the poor dupe who was surely entering that cunningly baited trap.

"Captain Clean-up! The very villain they charged me with being! And—you killed him old friend?"

"Well, if I didn't just do all that, I flatter myself I helped turn his toes up! We filled him so full of lead that only his clothes held him from falling all apart when we picked him up for examination!"

"And then—who was he? Tell me, man! Who could it be near enough like me to fool an old friend like Paul Gordon?"

As he asked the question, one of Dickson's mates struck swift and sure, knocking Castle senseless to the neck of his startled horse?

CHAPTER XIX.

LUCKY DICKSON BAGS HIS GAME.

The false Sport had given the covert signal for this foul blow, and at the same time had ranged his horse close alongside that bestridden by Martin Castle.

As the unfortunate man drooped forward upon the neck of his steed, Lucky Dickson grasped him by the throat with vicious energy, at the same time calling aloud:

"Pull his teeth, mates! Don't give him a chance—ah! now I have got ye!"

He clung to that throat like a human bulldog, although there was not a sign of resistance to be seen or felt; that blow had been too deliberately dealt for any mistake as to its result.

Other hands quickly removed that belt of arms, and even searched the senseless Sport for hidden arms, before Lucky Dickson would even slacken his deadly grip for an instant.

"Look to the nags, mates!" he said, as he slipped out of his saddle and dragged his game after him. "Steady them, there! Nothing like making all sure as we go along!"

"You're not—it isn't croaking, Lucky?" huskily asked one of the lesser knaves.

"Who said anything about croaking? I'm only—wait a weenty bit, lads, and I'll tell you all about it!"

At each break in his speech Lucky Dickson turned or shifted his still unconscious victim, knotting stout thongs about his wrists and at the elbows, then springing to his feet with a full-drawn breath like one just winning great relief.

But he who had dealt that dastard blow seemed far less at ease, and leaning over in his saddle, gazed keenly into that pale face, now upturned toward the starry vault of heaven.

"Then he isn't—I hit him a mighty tough clip, Lucky!"

"Not tough enough to flatten his skull, though, pardner!"

"I most wish it had been! If he knows—when he comes back, he'll try mighty hard to play even! And—I wish he was—eh?"

Lucky Dickson laughed anew at that significant gesture, but stepped in front of the bound Sport, who was just giving signs of recovering his senses, speaking swiftly:

"None of that, pardner! You've done all the work I measured-out for you, and now—the sooner you rack out for town, the better!"

"But—he'll surely remember it all to us, Lucky! And he'd make a terribly nasty man on the war-path—yes he would, now!"

"I'll agree to make that all right, boys. I'll insure you against any afterclap, so far as this fine gentleman is concerned."

"Then you mean—you don't mean to let him slip ye, Dickson?"

"That's all right, I tell you for the last time! He's going to levant, going to skip the country and never bother either Crystal City or any of her citizens from this night!"

"Then you are going to croak him?" persisted the uneasy knave, unwilling to take his departure without winning some positive assurance that no dread of vengeance by that unfortunate fellow need trouble his dreams, sleeping or waking.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies!" crisply retorted the gambler, with an impatient wave of his hand in the direction of town. "It ought to be enough that I swear he'll never rise up to make you more trouble, so—Rack out, I tell you! Do you want him to spot you for a dead moral?"

Martin Castle was making a faint, aimless effort to lift himself to his feet, groaning hollowly, though still too badly confused for realizing what had befallen himself.

"Leave me his nag; I'll see to that, as well as to its master. Now—pull out o' this in a holy hurry, lads!"

Without further parley the two lesser villains obeyed, riding away under the stars by the most direct route possible.

Left alone with his victim, Lucky Dickson bent over him and deftly applied the gag which he had long since prepared with an eye to just such a contingency.

Martin Castle's heavy lids lifted at that touch, and he tried to speak, to ask some question, doubtless about what had happened; but Lucky Dickson was not ready to make his full explanation just then, and shoving the gag between the jaws thus voluntarily separated, he rudely rolled the betrayed Sport over on his face, kneeling between his shoulders until his busy fingers had tied the last necessary knot.

"Good as old wheat, and sure to fetch a mighty sight higher price by weight, too!" the gambler exultantly spoke as he removed his weight and lifted Castle to a sitting posture by a firm grip on his collar.

Their eyes met, just then, and that dazed, bewildered light was swiftly eclipsed by a hot glow of fierce indignation as Martin Castle recognized his enemy, at last.

"Begin to see through the knot-hole, don't you, pardner?" mockingly asked the traitor, seeming to enjoy that moment, so long and so busily schemed for. "Ha! ha! ha! You are going to do the toes-up act, my pretty man, instead of the genuine Captain Clean-up!"

As he realized how utterly he had been befooled, Martin Castle seemed to recover all his bodily powers, and threw every ounce of strength into an effort to burst the bonds that held him helpless to avenge or even to defend himself.

He sprung to his feet, but Lucky Dickson nimbly dodged around to grasp him from behind, fairly lifting him clear of the ground in spite of his most desperate struggles.

"Quiet, you fool!" came pantingly over his shoulder. "I've got you foul, and all you can do won't mend matters any! Quiet, I say! Or—if you like that better—lie down!"

The affair might have ended far differently had the two men met upon anything like an equal footing, but as it was, Castle was flung to earth with vicious violence, and almost as quickly the gambler was sitting astride his heaving chest, holding the sharp point of a glittering blade menacingly over his eyes.

"Promise to act decently, Castle, or I'll gouge an eye out of its socket so quick you'll never know what's coming until all's dark! I'm going to take you a bit of a jaunt, and I'm not in the humor to stand any more of your nonsense. So—wink both eyes if you'll knuckle to what you can't hinder, or—out goes one 'of your lamps!'

Never mortal man looked and spoke more viciously in earnest than did the Gambler Sport just then. He held his knife close above the fated orb, making the keen point quiver as though it was fairly eager to bite off the thread of dear sight!

Martin Castle had flung all his powers into that one fierce effort, yet had been unable to either break or slip those cunningly applied bonds.

Utterly helpless, wholly at the vicious mercy of this villain, what else could he do but—submit?

Lucky Dickson broke into a low, jeering laugh as those lids closed in silent yielding, and putting up his knife he once more jerked his victim to a sitting posture, then spoke:

"Of course I could manage to get along without your help, old fellow, but I never did like a sulky pard, and so—will you climb into your saddle with my assistance, or shall I do some more coaxing?"

Castle rose to his feet and moved across to where his horse had been hitched, and as he put foot into stirrup, Dickson lent him a supporting hand until he was fairly astride the saddle once more.

With swift dexterity the gambler fastened a double hitch about each ankle, thus guarding against the possibility of a fall, either willful or accidental, then mounted his own steed and drew close alongside his prisoner.

"Pity to hide such a lovely mug, isn't it?"

he said, mockingly, as he produced a black mask—almost a hood—which he quickly secured in place, twisting it around so that Castle could make no use of the twin eyelets cut in the cloth. "Just to make it a bit more binding in case we should run up against any stray citizens, you understand? For you are Captain Clean-up as half the world knows by this time!"

Lucky Dickson seemed in particularly high glee, just then, judging from his tones and actions, yet there is poor sport in chaffing a silent adversary, and he was not ready to grant Martin Castle the full use of his tongue, just yet.

So he fell into silence as he freed the horse and led it away from the scene of capture, moving like one who has a certain destination in view.

That destination was a good ways off, as it proved, but by spurring up wherever the nature of the ground would permit, and forcing both nags to their best walking-gait over the rougher parts, Dickson made more than fair time, and finally drew rein with a low grunt of relief.

"Home at last!" he ejaculated as he swung himself out of the saddle and flung reins over a convenient bush, then turned his attention toward his human game. "You're not too sorry, I imagine, pardner?"

Of course there could be no answer given, nor did he wait for any.

Stooping down, he quickly severed the rope which joined Castle's ankles, and then reached up to pull the Sport out of his saddle.

"Steady, pard!" he muttered as those half-numbed feet struck the earth. "I know you're not drunk, but you act mighty like it! Steady, while I hitch your nag and—take a lean if you must, then!"

He shifted that living weight from his own shoulder to the gnarled trunk of a tree close by, then hastily hitched the second horse.

As he did this, Martin Castle started off in a desperate dash for liberty, blinded and bound though he was.

With a vicious curse the gambler sprung forward in hot pursuit, but the chase was ended almost ere it was begun; Castle ran into a scrubby bush, losing his balance and pitching forward upon head and shoulders.

"Will you never leave off playing the fool?" harshly muttered Dickson as he grasped his prey and once again jerked him rudely upon his feet. "Come! Since you're spoiling for a foot-race, suppose you walk a little match with me for—come, I say!"

But Martin Castle refused to obey either command or impulse. He let his weight hang limply upon the gambler, and with a low, vicious oath at such ill-timed obstinacy, Dickson put arms around that form, heaving it to a shoulder then staggering hastily forward!

Luckily for both, perhaps, the distance to be covered was by no means great, and as Castle was lowered to touch earth again, he felt as by instinct that he was being taken into a cave or tunnel of some description.

Half-dragging, half-carrying his prey, Lucky Dickson proceeded a few rods further, then let his captive fall rudely to earth, harshly speaking as he did so:

"Now you stay put, pardner, or I'll pin you fast to the floor with my knife through your liver! Stay put, or—fare heap sight worse!"

Martin Castle could hear the gambler bustling about for a minute or two, then a dim red glow began to penetrate that stifling mask. And a few seconds later a rude hand jerked that covering from his face.

He saw that they were in a rude, irregular shaped cavern of some sort, but the recently kindled fire was not powerful enough to make it clear whether that was natural or the work of human hands.

Lucky Dickson cut the thongs holding that gag in place, and as he spat the vile morsel out, the Crystal City Sport huskily gasped:

"You treacherous devil! I'll kill you for this!"

CHAPTER XX.

A LIFE PUT UP AT AUCTION.

Lucky Dickson turned to toss a handful of dry sticks upon the fire he had kindled, more for its light than warmth, although it felt

chill and damp there in that underground chamber.

This done, he turned again, squatting upon his heels as he gazed half-quizzically into the flushed and angry face of the prisoner.

"Well, now, pardner," he spoke with a provoking drawl, "you're in a pretty condition to be prating of slaughter-house doings, now, ain't you?"

"Just give me half a show, you cur!"

"To give you so much after all my trouble would be to brand myself ass; and, whatever else I may be, I'm no fool," coolly retorted the gambler. "You've had your last show on earth—unless—wonder if you would be wise enough to grab that chance, now?"

Martin Castle clinched his teeth firmly together. He realized how utterly helpless he was in this villain's power, and feeling that Lucky Dickson was merely toying with him, pretty much as a cat torments a mouse before eating it, he determined to lessen that sport as far as might be.

The gambler nodded his comprehension, giving a bit of a chuckle as he read that resolution.

"All right, my covey! I like you better just that way, for I've a right smart to tell you, and none too much time for sparing, either! So, here I come, and you want to listen with both ears!"

"I'm not doing this dirty job on my own account; don't you think that for a single minute, pardner? Fact is, you're blocking the path of a heap sight better man than Martin Castle ever dared be, and so you had to be gently removed."

"You mean that devil, Nathan Manning?" impulsively cried the prisoner, forgetting his resolve in that flush of fierce hatred thus awakened anew.

"That's all right, my fine fellow, but I'm not calling over names at present," coolly said the gambler. "It ought to be enough for you to learn that this gentleman stands willing to put up a neat little stack of yellow-boys to have you put past the power of annoying him further."

"Not to place too fine a point upon it, pardner, he hired me to wipe you off the face of this earth. And now—are you willing to outbid this gentleman, Martin Castle?"

There was an abrupt change of tone as Lucky Dickson asked this blunt question, and he leaned a trifle closer his captive the better to read that face.

Martin Castle flushed hotly, then turned paler than ever, but he made no answer in words, and drawing a long breath, the gambler harshly spoke again:

"It's solid business, Castle, although you may think I'm joking. I give you a fair chance, now, but if you can't or won't raise the offer of my man, I'll kill you as I would mash the head of a rattlesnake!"

"Oh, you devil!"

"Not exactly, pardner," with a short laugh that sounded even more vicious than his former threatening tone. "I'm not the devil, but you'll have a fine chance to scrape acquaintance with that same horned, hoofed and forked-tailed gentleman unless you buy your life from me!"

Angry as Martin Castle was, with ample cause for anger, too, he felt that he would be lessening his frail chance for life by too plainly betraying his sentiments, just then!

It was no easy task he thus set himself, but he managed to ask, in fairly calm tones:

"Who is it that puts such an extravagant value upon my life, then?"

"Not your life so much as your death, pardner," amended the gambler with atrocious coolness. "That is hardly the same thing, is it, now?"

"You know what I mean, Dickson; why not answer my question?"

"Well, a fool can ask more questions in a minute than a wise man can answer in an hour, and so—never mind the who part of it, just so you understand that my employer is lousy with ducats, and stands ready to pay me a fair price for doing his work."

"It's Nathan Manning, then! He's the only villain I know who could or would play such a dirty trick as this! It's Nathan Manning—isn't it, Dickson?"

"That's merely a guess of yours, but let

it go at that," coolly returned the gambler. "You'll never be where you can do any damage by thinking so, unless—well, your life is put up at auction, pardner! I have one solid bid, and now—what is yours?"

"You don't really mean that, man! You're a tough case, I know, Lucky, but still you're too nearly white for playing assassin!"

"Am I, then? Thanks for the compliment, Martin, but don't you bank too heavily on that fool notion. I'm like any other man in my line of business: always ready to turn a trick that's got money in it!"

"But surely not to play butcher, Dickson?"

"Even that, so long as the wage is fixed accordingly," came the cruelly frank response. "And you can rest fully assured that I made certain I'd be paid a more than fair price before I fell to work at all."

He ceased speaking, seemingly with the expectation of hearing further from the prisoner; but Castle remained silent, his head drooping and his eyes lowered to the ground in dejection.

"I'm facing all my cards before I ask you to fairly chip in, pardner," Dickson added, after that brief pause. "I make no bones about saying that I'm offered a big pile of rocks to put you forever out of the way. And I'll kill you without wink or blink unless you can assure me there's more money in letting you go free!"

Martin Castle lifted his head and looked straight across into the eyes of his captor. His lips parted as though he would make reply, but then closed again without the escape of a single syllable.

"Oh, I'm not in such a mighty rush about your deciding, pardner," declared the gambler, casting a little fresh fuel upon the fire. "I'm just enough Yankee to enjoy driving a bargain, and this—it's not often a fellow gets to sell a human life, nowadays, is it?"

Still no word from the bound man, though a slight shiver shook his athletic frame as he listened to that diabolically cool speech.

"Take your time to get your jawing-tackle into fair working condition, pardner," said Lucky Dickson with outward placidity, though that evil glitter was brightening again in his keen eyes as the firelight fell athwart his face. "I don't know as I can blame you for wanting to count up your actual value, but—"

"You're not merely playing with me, Dickson?" suddenly demanded the captive Sport. "You honestly offer me a chance to outbid Manning?"

"Did I say Manning was the first bidder, though?"

"No, but— He is, isn't he?"

"Time enough for telling all that part of it after you've oversized the pile I'm already offered for your life, Martin. So—how much do you hold your life-lease at, pardner?"

"If I pay you your price, how am I to know you'll keep your part of the bargain?"

"Isn't my word of honor as a gentleman sufficient security?"

Castle gave an impatient shake of his head at this preposterous speech, but Lucky Dickson coolly added:

"That's got to be good enough security for you, my pretty fellow, or else we'll cry the auction off and—down you go as sold to the highest bidder!"

"Wait, please," and Martin Castle forced himself to disguise the fierce hatred and loathing which he felt for this cold-blooded bravo. "If I raise that bid, I'm to go free—wholly free, of course?"

"Foot-free, certainly, but bound by a pledge of honor not to go back to Crystal City or—"

"What's that?"

"You've got to take a solemn oath that you'll never return to Crystal City, but will at once leave this part of the country forever," the gambler coldly said, gazing steadily into that flushing face opposite.

"And if I refuse to make any such pledge?"

"You'll never be asked to make another, because you won't have the breath essential," frankly declared Dickson. "But that isn't all, so you may as well take the entire bolus at a single gulp."

"You will also make solemn oath that you will never write a line, you will never send a message of any sort or description, never

give a sign or do aught soever through which Miss Marlon Wailer can—"

"Stop, you blackhearted hound!" fiercely cried the prisoner, trying his utmost to break the bonds that hampered his arms so effectually. "You've said enough—too much! The only promise I'll make is to kill you and all the rest of the infernal curs who've taken part or lot in this devilish game! I'll never know rest!"

"Now you're lying, Martin Castle," coldly cut in the gambler as he rose to his feet and slowly drew a revolver from its scabbard.

"You will now rest; such rest as many a wiser fool than you have found in an unmarked grave!"

"Better that than knuckling down to a dirty whelp of Satan like you are now proving yourself, Luke Dickson!" defiantly retorted the prisoner, showing no trace of fear as he looked up into that stern face.

"I'm open to admit that you've got a craw full of sand, Martin," his enemy said, at the same time lifting the hammer of his pistol far enough to clear the cylinder which he deftly revolved as though to make sure the weapon was in perfect condition. "You're pretty nigh as good as they make 'em, but—you're at the end of your rope at last!"

"Honestly, now, I wish I could afford to let you live, Martin! You and I never ran in couples, and never seemed to fay in as two such good men ought—but now—just as I'm beginning to fairly appreciate your sterling qualities, old man, I've got to blow out your light—and your brains with it!"

Suddenly squatting down as before, face to face with his victim, the gambler thrust his pistol forward until its cold muzzle lightly touched the forehead of the Crystal City Sport.

Face to face, eye to eye, that hammer ready to fall at signal of the brown forefinger, which was gently curved in front of the plated trigger!

A score seconds thus, then Martin Castle spoke in clear, unshaken tones, never flinching even the fraction of an inch from that deadly weapon:

"Shoot, you cowardly knave!"

Instead, Lucky Dickson lowered his pistol, drawing back a bit as he gave a brief laugh before speaking:

"No, no, my dear fellow! That would spoil my bargain, for once I'd lifted your roof, and so spoiled your beauty, my employer would jump at the chance to dispute your identity; see?"

There was no reply—no word from Martin Castle.

Instead, his head dropped until his chin touched his bosom, his eyes closed, and a shiver agitated his entire figure.

He had nerved himself to meet the death he fully expected was coming right then and thus, but now a reprieve came instead, he turned weak and sick for the minute from reaction.

Taking advantage of that weakness, Dickson flung Castle backward, holding him helpless while he secured a gag in place, then tied his legs at both knees and ankles. Rising, he said:

"So-long, pardner! I'm going to fetch your purchaser, now."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CHERUB AND HIS LITTLE PARADE.

CRYSTAL CITY had been late in getting to bed on that eventful night, for that armed raid upon the Alhambra, added to the rescue of Jack Lawson by a portion of the same lawless gang, with the little accidents which are naturally to be expected on such occasions, postponed the usual hour for retiring.

But those who were able to leave bed and habitation lost precious little time in doing so at an early hour the next morning, for the still and peaceful air was split wide open by the rapid rattling of firearms.

A string of explosions which fairly ran in to each other, then winding up with a prolonged yell, shrill and ear-splitting!

The first idea of more than one rudely awakened citizen was that Captain Clean-up and his lawless aggregation had returned to finish the work they had so audaciously begun the night before, and though there might have been seen numbers of men only

half-clad at the best, never a one could have been found without rifle or pistol or "scatter-gun" as the town turned out to greet the author of all that racket.

A second string of shots and another piercing yell drew all eyes toward the long slope of the stage trail in the direction of Hoodoo Gulch, and right there they beheld the prime cause of all this unusual disturbance.

The citizens stared, as well they might!

A line of horsemen descending that long slope in single file, but forming a procession the exact like of which never a Crystalite of them all had ever witnessed before!

Each one of those first four riders was bound and gagged, fastened so firmly to the saddle that falling off by accident or through intention was out of the question.

Over the faces of the first three men was a black, eyeleted mask, thus effectually preventing recognition by any of the astonished citizens, but that of the fourth remained bare, showing pale and haggard in the early morning.

Those four horses were ingeniously fastened together, head and tail, the better to keep the trail, while a lasso ran from head to rear of the unique little procession, serving the purpose of a line, its latter end gripped fast by the fifth and last of the party.

All this the citizens saw as they started toward the long slope, and for a few moments they knew not what to think, what to say; but then Paul Gordon gave a whoop and a yell as his keen old eyes recognized the fourth in line.

"Jack Lawson, or I'm a howlin' liar from way up the crick! An—glory to smoke! Thar's the Cherub which—ow-wow! Hold me while I kick a hole clean through the moon!"

Like one who feels fully satisfied with the amount of attention he had called forth, Curly Kid shook his line and quickened the pace of his odd tandem, coming down the remainder of the long slope at a brisk trot, taking off his hat and swinging it cheerily as they struck the level and drew close to the town.

All this time the excitement was growing, and given the proper clue by that recognition of the lariat-caster, added to the grim regalia worn by his companions in bonds, the citizens made such a show of welcome that the Cherub from Cheyenne swiftly rounded up his little procession and placed his own horse between the captives and those oncoming men.

"Go easy, gentlemen" he cried out, sharply, one hand showing gun and its mate spread protectingly toward his prisoners. "It's law and order, not lynch-law, remember!"

"Who are they? Wher'd you corral 'em? Who helped ye turn the trick? Why don't you show 'em up?"

Too fast for counting, much less for answering in regular order came a flood of questions upon the Cherub, and it was not until both hands armed and he looked to be on the point of shooting in stern earnest that he could check that eager rush of half-clad but wholly armed men.

"I'm only one man against a crowd, gentlemen, but that gives me so much the bigger advantage, for you're white—clean white!" diplomatically cried the Cherub, when his firm front had produced the desired effect.

"Jes' look to lis'en, will ye?" cried Gordon, enthusiasm showing in his face, figure and voice. "Jes' one man, but—ekil to a rijiment! Jes' one man—but the billy-be-durndest man I ever did see!"

A number of cheers greeted this wild praise, but mingling with them came other and far different sounds: sounds that savor'd far more strongly of killing than of praise.

So at least the Cherub from Cheyenne interpreted them, and holding his ground in front of his hampered squad, he spoke again:

"There's no man living this day who'd hate worse to get into a serious mix with you gents of Crystal City, but—those four men belong to me until I see fit to dispose of them. They are my meat!"

"Who are they? And what are they?"

"Just what I'm trying to tell you, gentlemen," coolly retorted the Cherub, gracefully sweeping his guns over that gathering the

while. "As I said, they're my meat! I had considerable trouble in rounding 'em up after this fashion, but that makes 'em look all the more valuable in my eyes; far too valuable for me to step aside in favor of Judge Lynch!"

Bold talk, coming from one man against fully one hundred, but Curly Kid had lectured before similar audiences before this day, and knew just what he was doing.

Still, the victory was not yet won, and from among many other cries and ugly mutterings, there came one distinct question:

"Who are they? Do they belong to Captain Clean-up's gang?"

"They belong to me, just now, my dear sir, and even you can't deny a man the right to defend his own!"

"But—if they're part of the gang that tried to take the town, last night—"

"That is for the evidence to show, when they're brought to trial, my good friend. And this much I'm telling you as a last say-so: a fair and square trial they shall have if one man can guarantee so much! And—I'd hate like sin to pull trigger at such a good-looking crowd, gentlemen all, but I'll shoot the straightest I know how if you force me!"

"That's white talk, from a white man!" declared Paul Gordon, stepping forward and facing his fellow-citizens, revolver in hand. "I'm hyar fer a fa'r shake; an' all that's clean white want to git on the same level! Come, boys! Make it tryin' fu'st an' hangin' last!"

This characteristic speech seemed to turn the scale in the Cherub's favor, and in another minute the citizens were fairly divided, at least one half of them all standing forth in favor of law and order as against pure lynch-law justice.

Curly Kid had counted on nothing less, but he saw faces in that assembly which warned him to still keep on guard; among them that of the tall and portly banker, Nathan Manning.

That gentleman kept fairly well in the background, saying nothing, doing nothing so far as the Cherub could see; but that strong face was unusually pale, and though he wore his hat slouched low, Curly Kid fancied that face was hard and strained as though the banker felt far more than he cared to show, just then.

But the Cherub knew how easy it was to lose the favor of a mob, even after winning it, and as the quickest method of closing up the entire affair, he lifted a hand to ask attention, then spoke rapidly when all else grew stilled.

"A short horse is soon curried, gentlemen, and a brief tale don't take a long time to unfold, so—here's the reading of the ride!"

"You've asked me who these four fellows are, and I tell you frankly that they're every man-jack of 'em all members of the Clean-up Gang!"

"They'd ought to climb a tree, then!" harshly cried one of the mass.

"Try them first, and then I don't mind your hanging if you find 'em guilty," quickly answered the Cherub, then adding: "It so happened that I was at the Alhambra when that tough gang intruded, and—"

"Waal, now, I do reckon he was right thar!" ejaculated Gordon, with a gesture which fitly matched his enthusiastic voice. "An' ef ever—"

"One at a time and we'll last longer, pardner," good-naturedly interposed the Cherub, waving a hand to still his admirer. "As I started to explain, gentlemen, I chanced to be at the Alhambra, but as I seemed to be somewhat in the way of those wild-eyed fellows' fun, I—I left!"

"I'm not ashamed to own as much, gentlemen: I did leave, and left in such a hurry that I took sash and all with me! I reckon I owe the Alhambra a new window, and I'll pay my debts if I live long enough!"

"I left, and when I got tired of running, I saw these three black-avised gentlemen just riding off with our mutual friend, Jack Lawson, there, whom they had rescued from—"

His glib explanation was cut short by the spiteful crack of a pistol, and the largest one of the four prisoners ducked his head sharply as though stung by the flying lead!

With a sharp cry Curly Kid whirled about to face the direction whence that shot had sped, to see a badly bruised fellow rushing

that way with revolver rising for another and more certain shot.

"Steady, pard!" the Cherub sternly warned as he pushed his horse in between the prisoners and this new peril. "Don't make me lay you out, for you can't—Hold, you fool!"

"They hammered me—look at the face o' me, then!" hoarsely cried the man, but flinching from that leveled pistol.

"Hold! I'll kill you like a dog if you pull trigger again!"

"I'll play even if—look at the head o' me, will you?"

"Play even like a white man, then, not by doing bloody murder on bound and unarmed prisoners," sternly reproved the Cherub. "They may hang if fairly proven guilty, but no man can butcher them while tied and helpless, without first downing me for good!"

It was one of the guards who had been beaten to insensibility, but as other men came to back the Cherub up in his stern resolution, the fellow quieted down and was led away by a friend.

Curly Kid crowded the rest of his explanation into as few words as possible, then added:

"Now I want to turn my meat over to square men, who'll guarantee them protection until they can be brought to trial. You, Mr. Gordon? As a personal favor, please pick out a number of good men and take charge of these fellows. I'm grown weary of running such a menagerie! Bah! it leaves a bad taste in my mouth!"

Satisfied now that he had done the very best he could to guarantee the quartette of sinners a fair show for their lives, Curly Kid turned away like one who feels he has played his part to an end, so far as that little drama was concerned.

As he did this, his keen eyes flashed over that gathering once more and paused for a brief space upon a brace of figures near the outer edge of it all: one a tall and portly man, his companion of less imposing dimensions, yet a trim-built and athletic looking fellow.

Curiously enough that glance recalled the banished Sport, Martin Castle, and the queer idea made Curly Kid take a second and longer look; he saw that the fellow was not Castle, though his general build favored that assumption, and then he rode away toward the hotel.

As he passed clear of the crowd, Bunker Manning followed him with far from friendly eyes, muttering barely above his breath:

"He's a devil on ten wheels, Lucky! If we give him rope enough, he'll contrive to hang every mother's son of us!"

CHAPTER XXII. CURLY KID'S COMMISSION.

APPARENTLY without worrying his brain further as to what might become of the men whom he had paraded into Crystal City, Curly Kid Cummings rode briskly up to the hotel front, swinging himself out of the saddle and dropping rein over a hitching-post planted there, ran nimbly up the broad flight of steps and entered the office.

Here he found the landlord, and bidding him have his horse cared for as that noble animal deserved, he begged that a breakfast for half a dozen might be hurried up as much as possible.

"A mighty hungry half-dozen, too, landlord!" he added as he crossed over to the sink and began stripping for a wholesale wash. "I'm that half-dozen, crowded into one suit of clothes; but if you reckon to make more than your customary percentage off this meal—well, you'll get left, and left mighty bad, too."

A customer like that generally commands brisk service, but almost before Curly Kid could dry his face and run a pocket-comb through his damp hair, the first of a long procession of curious citizens put in an appearance, eager to learn more about that remarkable capture.

For a time the earlier comers hung about the door of the dining-room where Curly Kid sat at table, eating far more like the hungry half dozen than a gentle Cherub: but then their curiosity overcame bashful diffidence, and they fairly invaded the dining-room.

"Excuse me, and my poor appetite, gen-

tlemen!" cried Curly Kid as well as he could for eating. "You really must excuse me—or I'll excuse myself—and you, too! Can't you find the door, gentlemen?"

That rather pointed hint served to clear the room, but only to add just so many units to the formidable total which fairly filled the hall and half the office.

Cummings saw that he would have to take some decisive measures to win clear of all this curiosity, else he would stand a very poor show of completing an important commission with which he had burdened himself.

By the time his appetite was fairly vanquished, however, his line of action was fairly marked out, and pushing back his chair he arose, smiling blandly into those eager faces which crowded the doorway.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen, but don't you think you could all hear the little I have to say much better if you were out in front of the hotel, with plenty of elbow-room for all?"

That seemed enough, and with ludicrous haste the men hurried out of the building, facing toward the hotel and uniting in an enthusiastic cheer as the Cheyenne Cherub appeared in the open door, smiling even more blandly than before as he leisurely surveyed that assembly.

That cheering died away as his right hand arose in a gracious gesture, and then the hero of the hour spoke:

"I take it for granted that I'm the humble cause of this truly gratifying assembly, gentlemen, but—may I ask just what is expected of your very humble servant?"

"Waal, we want to know the hull darned business!" bluntly answered one of the crowd. "How'd ye ketch them 'ar blamed critters? Who'd ye hev to help ye, an' whar—oh, blame it all! Tell us the hull story!"

"If I boil it down a bit, will you be content, gentlemen?"

A chorus of assent came back, and then the Cherub added:

"Thanks, gentlemen, and right here you have the whole story: I merely watched my chance, surrounded the squad, and took 'em all prisoners!"

"Thank you for your kind attention through my prosy and tedious narrative, gentlemen, and—permit me to bid you good-morning, all!"

With those words came a low bow, then the Cherub backed swiftly inside, closing and locking the door before the bewildered crowd could fairly suspect his trick.

Without waiting to hear just what spirit his little ruse was received with, Curly Kid hurried through the hotel and out of the rear door, picking his way rapidly across to the next street, where he paused for a few seconds to look keenly around, like one trying to locate himself.

"It ought to lie out this way, from what the fellow said," he muttered to himself, as he resumed his progress. "Of course I might ask, and I will if I have to; but these Crystalites are so blessedly crammed with curiosity that—Ha! ha! ha!"

He went off into a hearty if half-smothered fit of laughter as he recalled those blank faces which he had so dexterously fled from; but then, as he sighted a comfortable looking house some little distance ahead, his mood altered, swiftly.

"That must be the place, and now—wonder just how it'll all pan out, anyhow?"

He passed through the gate and hurried up to the front entrance, lifting his hand to rap sharply, only to find the door swinging open as though of its own volition, and then he saw a gentleman and lady standing before him, evidently intending to leave the house on trip or visit.

"I—beg pardon, I'm sure, but is this the residence of Mr. Waller, the banker?" asked the Cherub, stammering a bit, for once in his life taken by surprise.

"My name is Waller; yes, sir," curtly answered the elderly gentleman, stepping back a pace as he added: "Will you enter, sir? I suppose you wish to see me?"

"You, or—well, sir, to tell the plain truth, my business more nearly concerns this—that is to say, Miss Marion Waller."

The Cherub bowed again, his comely face flushing a bit more than usual as he met those big black eyes, so full of ladylike wonder. And as Marion looked even more lovely

than usual this fine morning, his embarrassment is not so much to be wondered at, after all.

"My daughter?" exclaimed the banker, surprise mixed with suspicion, and both just tinged with anger as he confronted the stranger who spoke and acted so strangely. "What manner of business can you have—Do you know this—this gentleman Marion?"

Before the maiden could reply, Curly Kid rallied himself, and in more natural tones he spoke:

"I have not the honor of that acquaintance, Mr. Waller, yet I most respectfully solicit a few words in private with Miss Waller. Believe me, sir, I am not making this request without good grounds."

Marion shrunk back with a low murmur, and Isham Waller not only looked his suspicion, but gave it voice when he quickly uttered:

"I prefer to be the sole judge as to those grounds, sir! If you can convince me you have good and valid reasons for making such an extraordinary request, why—"

The shadow of a frown showed itself upon the face of the Cherub, and his voice sounded a bit harsher when he spoke again:

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Waller, but I'm not trying to serve my own ends alone by making this request. I merely pass on the words I received from another pair of lips, and—permit me to step inside."

He took that liberty without waiting for its granting, and gently pushing the door to behind himself, Curly Kid flashed a look from father to daughter, then back again before adding the words:

"I was begged to give my message to the ears of Miss Marion Waller alone, but since you object—let it be this way! Now—my name is Horace Cummings, and I am the man who recovered the package of money belonging to your bank, Mr. Waller."

"My heartiest thanks are your due, sir," began the senior partner, but the Cherub cut him short by an impatient gesture.

"Let that pass: I merely mentioned the fact as a possible explanation of what is to come. And that—it chanced in my way to capture a portion of the Clean-up Gang, last night, and I've just left them under guard, to bring you word from one of their number.

"He begged me to lose no time in seeking out Miss Marion Waller, to implore her to pay him a visit as soon as might be; that he could give her highly important information concerning Captain Clean-up."

The maiden changed color more than once during this crisp report, but as Curly Kid ceased speaking, she huskily cried out:

"It is not—I'll never believe that Martin Castle is that—is a criminal, sir!"

"Nor I, Miss Waller," gravely said the Cherub, with a bow. "I believe that gentleman has been most unjustly accused, and this is one reason why I was so willing to take this commission."

"Given you by one of that lawless gang, you say, sir?" asked Waller.

Curly Kid bowed assent, and the banker exclaimed:

"Important information concerning—surely that means Martin?"

"Whether it does or does not, I have no means of knowing, sir," the messenger said, rather coldly. "I have delivered the message intrusted to me for the ears of Miss Waller; now you must act as you deem wisest."

Marion had sunk down upon the lower step of the staircase leading to the second story, seemingly half stunned by that fresh complication.

In spite of her bravely uttered belief in the honor of the man she loved so truly, she was trembling now as she thought of all that asked for interview might bring to light.

As Curly Kid ceased speaking, however, she sprung to her feet and murmured her thanks for his kindness, then spoke in clearer accents:

"This man; who is he, sir? Do you think it can be any person whom I—we have ever met, ever known?"

"I believe you both know and have met him, yes," came the answer. "I more than half believed him to be Martin Castle, until he was my prisoner and I had both time and opportunity for examining him more closely."

"Did he give you his name, Mr. Cummings?" asked Isham Waller.

"He said only to give that name if Miss Waller asked for it. Then I was to say Poley Peters begged her to pay him a speedy visit!"

"Napoleon Peters? Oh, his poor wife and—and children!" half-sobbed the maiden, burying face in hands at the revelation.

"Well, I don't trust him too far. He seems like a born liar, and certainly has been training in evil company, of late. Now, good-morning!" said Curly Kid in conclusion as he opened the door and turned away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN DEFENSE OF THE ABSENT.

Not so very long after the unique little parade arranged for the benefit of Crystal City by the Cheyenne Cherub, another rider came down the slope, kicking with first one heel and then the other, varying this by impatient thwacks upon a dusty hide from a short club.

That rider was none other than Asa Conway, the friend and heart-brother to whom Martin Castle had hastened after so successfully "standing off the town."

The worthy miner had urged his diminutive mount without cessation ever since the Crystal City Sport left him in such hot impatience, and though the meek donkey had apparently done its modest best, this was the result: broad daylight, and nothing seen of his partner yet!

But Asa Conway saw that something out of the ordinary must be taking place there, just within the edge of Crystal City, for such an unusual crowd would hardly have assembled for less than—

Conway did not dare complete the reason which flashed across his mind just then, but his honest face was paler than usual, and his big blue eyes were glowing dangerously as he kicked and thwacked and by all means at his command urged the burro down the slope and over the level to where that crowd still lingered, despite the fact that the Cherub had passed off the scene, and the four prisoners had been moved away to find at least temporary rest in an improvised jail.

Abandoning his burro when only a short distance from the crowd, Asa Conway hurried forward to learn the reason for that gathering, feeling a bit more at ease when he found Martin Castle had naught to do with it.

But, where was his partner? Surely Castle ought to be in evidence, unless that long ride had wonderfully altered his resolve?

Here and there Conway passed, listening far more than he talked, but feeling very little interest in this wonderful Cherub and still less in his prisoners, just then.

He let fall a question here, a query there, but none to whom he spoke seemed to know aught of the missing Sport.

As his anxiety increased Conway was less guarded in his questions, and before long some of that curiosity turned his way, and a little circle of citizens formed about him, beginning to ask questions in their turn.

Among those questions fell a word or two which warned the miner that he had said too much not to say more, and lifting his voice he told crisply how Martin Castle had paid him a brief visit, only to take horse again for Crystal City.

"I followed him as fast as I could, on my burro, but—here I am, and no signs of my pardner! What can have happened to him, then?"

That honest voice quavered a little as it asked that question, and there were marks of deep anxiety to be seen upon that honest face.

No one seemed able to answer that question, off-hand, and there was a brief silence; broken a few seconds later by a cold, sneering voice:

"Skipped out when he saw the rest of his gang in trouble, maybe!"

Asa Conway started like one dealt a coward blow, and his big blue eyes fairly flashed as a laugh greeted that insulting insinuation.

He failed to see just whose lips had shaped those words, but with a big fist clinched to add emphasis, he called out sternly:

"That's a dirty fling, and none but a coward would make it! Martin Castle is as white

as they make 'em, and whoever dares even to hint that he belongs the Clean-up Gang is a liar!"

No room left for doubting his full meaning, surely!

There were more than one growl coming, but no man offered to repeat that charge, and he who was first to make it seemingly lacked the nerve or hardihood to back it up by his presence in the ring.

Asa Conway glared around him, ready to do or to say as the occasion might demand, but as no one stepped forth to fatter that charge, he spoke himself, stern and distinctly:

"All Crystal City can't show up a whiter, cleaner, honest man than my friend and pard, Martin Castle! I say it, and I ought to know. I say it, and I say more: I say that an insult flung his way, hits me right where I live, and I'll face down the fellow who gives it, or he's got to flail me out—that's flat, now!"

Nathan Manning had been talking in guarded tones with Lucky Dickson through all this, only breaking off now and then to the more fully keep track of Asa Conway.

When it reached a point where insult was followed by defiance, the portly banker seemed to feel an added interest, and while giving his entire attention to the speaker, he gradually moved closer to the indignant miner.

Those flashing blue eyes took note of his coming, and it almost appeared as though those final words were flung directly into the face of the banker.

Nathan Manning lifted a white hand in a gesture which plainly asked for attention, and as Conway met his cold gaze squarely, the banker put his question into shape.

"Was Martin Castle at your claim yesterday in the afternoon, Mr. Conway?"

The miner flinched and turned color at that pointed query, but as he caught the beginning of an ominous growl from the crowd, he rallied and frankly made reply:

"No, sir, for he was waiting for me to meet him at Painted Rock."

The crowd fell away far enough to leave the banker ample elbow-room, and thus the two men stood fairly face to face.

"May I ask how you know he was in waiting at the Painted Rock, my dear sir?" persisted Manning, with a faint smile coming into his face.

"Because he was; because he told me so, and even you don't want to hint that my pard would lie to my very face!"

The miner displayed a growing anger, but the banker kept cool and composed; a vast advantage where such a miscellaneous crowd was to act as both judge and umpire.

"Oh, sir, if you object to my asking questions, or if you are afraid—for his sake—to answer them as frankly as they are put, why—"

"Afraid?" echoed Conway, flushing warmly. "Why should I be afraid?"

"There can be no good reason, of course, for all this region knows Asa Conway is honest as the day is long! And so—Castle told you he had been expecting you at the Painted Rock?"

"He did just that, and more—he showed me a note asking him to meet me there, and to wait until five o'clock if I failed to get there at a more seasonable hour!"

Nathan Manning paused for a brief space, purely to make his next question more impressive, then gravely asked:

"And that note: you wrote it, of course, Conway?"

The miner flushed warmly, but though he knew that admission might seriously injure the cause he was trying to defend, he stuck to the plain truth.

"No, sir! I never wrote that note. I never saw that note until Martin Castle placed it in my hand, last night, asking me to explain what it all meant!"

"Then—do you reckon Castle himself wrote it?"

"No one but a fool or a knave would even think of such a thing!" indignantly cried the miner, his hands clinching ominously. "No, sir, and you, men of Crystal City! Martin Castle has been played dirt all through this foul game, and—Hear me out, first!"

"I swear that this is all a vile scheme to down a good man! I know that Martin

Castle never had part or lot in this Captain Clean-up affair. I know that a certain clique in this town has banded together to down the man they're afraid to tackle single-handed or openly!"

"You are bringing strong charges, Mr. Conway, and—"

"I stand ready to back up each and every charge I make, Mr. Manning," came the swift retort. "I came here this morning to go bail for my friend and partner, and now—I stand ready to fight his battles, even before I fight my own!"

"Meaning the battles of Martin Castle, of course?" asked the banker, with a provoking drawl in his voice.

"Meaning Martin Castle, and—meaning all Crystal City, including yourself, Mr. Manning, if you really want it square from the shoulder."

There could be no room for mistaking his meaning, now, but the banker showed no signs of fear or of flinching. Instead, his smile grew more pronounced and he even moved a trifle nearer the miner as he spoke:

"That is powder wasted so far as I am concerned, Mr. Conway. I make no pretensions toward being a bravo, a chief, or a street-fighter. But Martin Castle has so often figured as one and all of these characters that I'm wondering why he lets you stand alone in his defense?"

Something like a cheer burst from the audience at this pointed speech, and Nathan Manning swiftly added:

"If Martin Castle is as innocent as you claim, Mr. Conway, why don't he speak for himself? Why isn't he here now to fight his own battles?"

"Because something has happened to hinder his coming," retorted the miner, forcing back his fierce rage as best he might for the time being. "Because he's run his head into another devilish trap set for him by the cowardly villains who dared not meet him in the open!"

"He foiled your first trap, by standing off the whole town with his guns, but now—you hell-hounds!" his voice rising higher though it grew hoarser, his right hand clinched tightly as it rose to lend additional emphasis to his vow.

"If real harm has come to Martin Castle through any of you within hearing right now, listen! I'll make you show your clean hands through all, or I'll go gunning after mighty worthless game! There you have it, and one fair bite is meant for you, Nathan Manning!"

Turning abruptly away, Asa Conway shouldered a passage for himself through that crowd, leaving the banker to swallow the threat as best he might.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"MARTIN CASTLE IS THE MAN!"

ISHAM WALLER was somewhat taken aback by the abrupt leave-taking and sudden departure of Horace Cummings, for there were many questions which he felt ought to have an answer, and much valuable information which the messenger alone could give.

But then his attention was claimed by Marion, and for the next few minutes the old gentleman had his hands full, trying to calm, to soothe, to comfort her, his only living child.

Almost hysterically Marion begged her father to take her at once to pay the visit begged for by "Poley" Peters, and in the same breath she denied the possibility that Martin Castle could be that infamous criminal, Captain Clean-up.

It took both time and pains to calm the agitated maiden, but Isham Waller would not leave either the house or her until Marion fought back her hysterical emotions, and once more looked herself, barring a slight redness about her lustrous eyes.

The banker offered to visit the prisoners and learn all Poley Peters could divulge, then hasten back with his report; but Marion would not give her consent.

"He asked for me, father, and I must go!" she declared, with forced composure. "You might frighten him, you are so stern, at times; but I—he would not frighten at me! And—he would not dare say anything but the truth, to my face!"

"He might—it may all be a trick to gain us over to his side," dubiously muttered the banker, nervously twisting his thin fingers.

"And so—better for me to go alone, at least for the first time, child."

"No, father," clinging to his arm and actually forcing him to the door. "I'm going—going with you, right now! He would not lie to me, if only in memory of his poor wife and children whom—"

"Whom you nursed like an angel, confound 'em!" spluttered the old gentleman, but yielding to the gentle force his love would not permit him to further oppose.

All this had consumed sufficient time to permit the excitement to subside in goodly measure, although it was still plain to be seen that something beyond the ordinary was in the air; and it was by no means a difficult task for Isham Waller to ascertain just where the four prisoners were confined for the time being.

This he did without having to ask any direct question which might have awakened unwelcome curiosity, or turned attention too closely toward his companion, just then.

Marion had pulled her vail in double folds over her face, and with that to aid her own resolution, the mask was fairly complete.

When fairly in sight of the building where the road-agents had been stowed away, Mr. Waller once more tried to win Marion from her resolution, and gain permission to first see Poley Peters, but in vain.

Although she did not put the fear into words, Marion dreaded to let her father see this knave save in her company, lest Peters add fresh danger to the perils already besetting Martin Castle, by falsely charging him with impersonating Captain Clean-up.

Finding that nothing less would satisfy her, Mr. Waller advanced with her at his side, until near enough to address the armed men on guard, one of whom was Paul Gordon.

In a few picked words he made known the purpose which brought him there at so early an hour, then added:

"You know me well enough, Mr. Gordon, to feel sure that no harm can come of granting my wish?"

"Waal, boss, I reckon that's all solid enough, only— You say it's Poley Peters you want to see?"

"That's the man, yes. And I wish to have a little private talk with him, sir. That can be arranged, of course?"

But Gordon shook his head in prompt negation at this, saying:

"Thar's jest the one room fer the hull blamed litter, sir, an' we cain't risk takin' ary one o' them outside. Ef you kin make it come to your likin' that way—the four in a heap—why, all right!"

Isham Waller hesitated at this unexpected obstacle, but as his eyes sought those of his daughter, her little head gave a decided nod. She spoke in a whisper, yet one that carried each word distinctly to his ear:

"Accept, please! We—I must see him now!"

Fearing to make a bad matter worse by further hesitation or even trying to coax his daughter to postpone her visit, Mr. Waller turned to Gordon and accepted that alternative.

After all, it might be for the best. With other eyes watching and other ears listening, Marion would be less apt to break down in case it was evil tidings the detected road-agent had to communicate.

Gordon opened the door and bore them company inside; but he remained only long enough to make the purpose of their visit known, and to let fall a grim caution by the way.

"Ye don't want to clean fergit yer good manners, boys. Ef ye do—waal, you'll hear somethin' drap, an' it'll drap mighty dugun heavy, too, now I'm tellin' ye—jes' so!"

Only lingering to add that the door would be open for their exit whenever they saw fit to call out or to rap, the long-gunned miner left the rude prison, closing the door behind him.

Although the bonds had been left upon their arms, those lower down had been removed, so that the prisoners could stand up and walk around, so far as their limited quarters permitted.

And as Gordon left the room, one of the road-agents came slouching forward, half-abashed, half-eager to win recognition.

It was the same individual whose general

appearance had so strongly interested Curly Kid before the Cherub turned from spy to assailant; but now there was very little about the fellow to awaken thoughts of the dashing Sport, Martin Castle.

Isham Waller moved so as to partly screen his daughter as the man came forward, and then he spoke, coldly:

"We have come in answer to your message, Mr. Peters. What is this important communication you wish to make, please?"

The fellow hesitated a bit, seeming hardly to know what to say or do first; but then he muttered in husky tones, like one who wished to keep his words from other ears:

"You'll play me white, sir? If I make a clean breast of it all, you will get me off? You'll get me set free, to lead a better life?"

Mr. Waller gave a little shiver of repugnance at that whining address, but masking his real feelings for the moment, he said:

"If there is anything I can do for you, Peters, with a clear conscience, be sure I'll do it. Now—what have you to tell us?"

Still the rascal seemed unwilling to speak out clearly, mumbling his gratitude for past favors, half-whimpering as he spoke of his poor wife and innocent children whom Marion had served like a veritable angel; and only when Mr. Waller reminded him that time was passing unimproved, and that he really could not linger much longer, would he even approach the point which held their interest.

"I'll do all I can for you, on this condition," said the banker, to make all clear before going further. "You shall tell the whole truth in every respect. You shall make a clean breast of this road-agent business, and, first of all—who is Captain Clean up?"

"It's that I wanted to talk about," hesitatingly muttered the road-agent, with a covert glance toward that veiled face. "I couldn't let her—the angel who nursed my poor babies back from the grave! I just couldn't bear to think of her being fooled so—"

All this was like rubbing salt into a fresh wound, and unable to bear more in silence, Marion impulsively spoke:

"It is not—don't you dare accuse Mr. Castle of being that infamous man, Poley Peters!"

"If I tell all the truth, how can I keep from saying just that, then?" sullenly muttered the criminal, doggedly meeting that flashing look.

Isham Waller interposed quickly, one hand pushing the maiden back a trifle, the other lifted with a gesture of warning to the prisoner as he said, sternly:

"Guard well your words, Peters! Don't say anything which is not fully susceptible of proof, for your word may mean death to the man you are accusing!"

"That's all right, sir, but what I say I'm willing to swear to," the fellow doggedly declared. "I thought at first I'd keep the secret, but when I came to look back and see all Miss Marion had—"

"Leave Miss Waller's name entirely out of the question, please," almost harshly interposed the banker, tightening his hold upon the maiden's arm in hopes of lending her renewed strength through an awakened pride.

"Then—who is Captain Clean-up?"

"Martin Castle is the man!" firmly declared Peters, swiftly adding: "I never knew that much until he held up the stage, yesterday, for the boss always kept his own counsel, and that was the very first glimpse I ever caught of his naked face. But then—I saw him as fairly as I see you, sir, this minute!"

"A lie! Another who looked like—like him!" brokenly protested the agitated maiden; but Poley Peters shook his head in swift denial.

"I wish it was, but it wasn't! I saw his face right then and there when Mr. Manning pulled off his mask. And I even talked with him about it, later on, after that devil from Cheyenne kicked our game upset!"

"And he—this Captain Clean-up of yours?"

"Swore us all to secrecy, and even told me he'd be my death if ever I so much as hinted at his being—what he frankly admitted—Martin Castle! And then—that's all, sir!

Only you'll not let them hang me for sins I couldn't—you'll help me free, sir?"

But Marion hung half fainting upon his arm, and Waller rapped at the door for exit as he hurriedly renewed his promise to do what lay in his power for the road-agent.

And then, tears dimming his own honest eyes, he led Marion to her home.

CHAPTER XXV.

MATTERS BEGIN TO LOOK DESPERATE.

NATHAN MANNING had all the air of a victor when that brief scene between himself and Asa Conway came to an end by the miner beating a retreat, and some of the crowd actually cheered him as such, but under that calm demeanor were far from comfortable feelings, just then.

For one thing, that parting threat made by Conway rankled sharply.

Manning was no coward, even if he declared himself no "chief." With no greater restraint put upon his actions than those dictated by physical fear alone, Asa Conway, good man though he undoubtedly was, might have found his Waterloo even before that grim challenge was dry upon his lips.

Then, too, Manning was far from feeling at ease or contented with his most important tool, Luke Dickson.

So far he had been unable to draw anything satisfactory from those guarded lips, and now, as he turned to rejoin the gambler, Lucky was no longer to be seen!

Nathan Manning hardly cared to openly betray his anxiety for further talk with the gambler, so refrained from asking any question of others as to Dickson's movements: but when he made certain Lucky had slipped entirely away from that gathering he swallowed an irate curse against what he mentally branded as a loss of nerve.

This was his mood when he came in contact with another one of the tools which he had called into play since beginning his deep-planned and dangerous scheme for winning both wife and fortune, while at the same time ruining a rival in love and a personal enemy.

At a covert sign from the banker, this fellow followed after his footsteps until they were sufficiently apart from all others for a private exchange of speech, then Manning said:

"I want to see Lucky Dickson as soon as may be. He was here only a few minutes ago, and can't have gone far away. Look him up, and send him to my rooms if before bawking hours: if after, say I'll look for him at the bank."

"All right, boss," said Dan Wheatley, the witness who alone kept Asa Conway from perjuring himself by swearing to a false *alibi* in the case of Martin Castle.

The stunted little knave with the rat-like face shuffled away on his mission, and Nathan Manning likewise passed out of eye and ear shot of that still excited assembly.

To all outward seeming he was as usual: the bland yet grave, cheerful yet sedate, prompt yet slow-moving man of business, of whom Crystal City had long since grown proud as a living, moving sign of her prosperity, such as few like towns could produce.

But underneath all that, ugly thoughts and even fears were at work.

The first drawback to his carefully laid plans had come with the appearance of this stranger from Cheyenne, but ever since that hour the blows had fallen swift and often.

Only for the double diversion offered by the Cherub, Martin Castle would surely have fallen into the hands of his enemies; and then, while the general excitement was at fever heat, how easy it would have been to bring about a "necktie festival!"

The capture, instead, of the ex-cowboy, Jack Lawson, had called for another desperate move to guard against his betraying the dangerous secrets of the Clean-up Gang as ransom for his own worthless neck.

True, no lives had been lost by that daring raid, but members of the party had been recognized, and that promised to breed awkward gossip. So long as their prime object had been won, however, that gave Nathan Manning slight worry; but now—Lawson was back again in bonds, and with him three other members of the Clean-up Gang!

Would they all stand firm? Could they each man be depended upon to guard such dangerous secrets as the lawless "family" held in common?

Had he covered his tracks as completely as he thought? Was his dangerous secret known only to himself and to Lucky Dickson?

That brought his thoughts once more to the odd behavior of the gambler, and again did the banker curse what he felt could only be a sudden loss of nerve on the part of Lucky Dickson.

He did not see or hear anything of Dan Wheatley until he was on his way to the bank building, to open up for the regular routine of the business day, and then the slinking, mean-faced little spy only brought disappointment.

So far he had failed to find aught of Dickson, and came for further instructions.

"Find him, if you have to raze the town over with a fine-tooth comb! If he has left the town, find that out: bring me word just when and how he left, with such other items as you may be able to pick up."

The spy grinned his comprehension, then shuffled away once more, while Nathan Manning proceeded to the bank and had everything in working order when the senior partner made his appearance.

Isham Waller seemed unusually grave, just then, and it did not take many minutes of shrewd maneuvering for Manning to extract the truth from the lips of his partner.

It was rarely, indeed, that the grave banker felt the need of a confidant among his own sex, but he did just now. The wild grief felt by his idolized child had affected him powerfully. She as wildly declared her perfect trust and faith in Martin Castle, but he—the proof was so direct, so overwhelming!

With inward delight, Nathan Manning listened to the account of that message from and visit to Poley Peters, and then, when Waller asked for his candid opinion, he said just enough, with never a word too much.

That guarded speech damaged Martin Castle far more than would have done a fierce tirade, and with his last hope for Marion darkened to actual gloom, Isham Waller turned to the daily business as a much-needed relief just then.

And Manning likewise experienced a change, though of an entirely different nature. Where everything had seemed in desperate shape but a few minutes earlier, now he saw almost certain success looming up ahead.

It was moving along toward noon when Dan Wheatley put in his appearance at the bank, and with a careless word in passing, to his partner, that the fellow had come on a matter of personal business, Manning beckoned his tool to enter the little room lying just back of the bank proper, where he motioned Wheatley to a chair, then spoke in lowered tones:

"Well, where is Dickson?"

"Left town, critter-back, afore you fu'st set me onto his track, boss," came the prompt response.

"Alone, or in company?"

"Jest him an' his critter, boss. Done struck out Hoodoo way, like he done hed mighty 'portant business that-a-way."

"Any talk about it, think? Any one wondering if he held any connection with the—you understand?"

"None that come my way, boss. Lucky didn't play like he was on the jump fer tall timber; jest rid off 'thout ary splurge or sneakin'. Jest went like you mought 'a' gone ef you hed legal business that-a-way, boss."

Nathan Manning frowned as he leaned forward pinching his ful' lips.

There was much in the more recent actions of this man that gave him secret uneasiness.

Was Dickson thinking to play him crooked? Was he hedging against possible disaster, planning to save himself at the expense of his master and employer?

Nathan Manning caught the rat-like eyes of the spy fixed upon his face with a hungry glitter, and then became his usual self once more.

Not that he feared being bitten by the human rat who had for so long been fed by his hand. It was merely the instinctive

caution of one who had trained himself to wear a mask by night as well as by day.

Letting drop the Dickson affair as though it really mattered but little, since he could trust Wheatley even more fully, Manning proceeded to cast temptation before the spy, though keeping his full intent thinly veiled.

He spoke of the recent sensation wrought by the Cherub from Cheyenne, then added his belief that the adventurer was far more than showed upon the surface.

"But even taking it for granted that he's nothing more than he appears to be: a stray Sport, never at ease unless in a racket of some description, and never so much in his glory as right now," slowly added the banker, "he's dangerous to us and our plans. So—he surely ought to be squelched, Daniel?"

"It'd take a terrible good man fer to do that squelchin', boss!"

"I know of a terrible good man right now, Daniel," with a look that pointed his meaning even more clearly. "And I know of a big fistful of gold that would fall in that good man's way if he only—ahem!"

"Ef he only—which?"

Nathan Manning flashed a swift look through the door into the other room, where Isham Waller was bending over a ledger; then, leaning a bit closer to the spy, he said:

"Of course it's only supposing a case, Daniel, but—supposing an accident should befall this Cherub from Cheyenne through the carelessness of a friend of mine, I'd feel it a duty devolving upon me to soothe that unlucky friend's anguish of mind over the deplorable affair, and as there's nothing fully equal to a golden salve—do you follow me, my good friend?"

"Ef thar was a accident? Ef that accident was to turn out serious? Ef it come so that—Waal, serious means somethin' like croakin', don't it, boss?"

"Very much like it, Daniel!" declared Manning, rising to his feet. "If anything should happen, you'll be sure to let me know, Wheatley!"

"For sure! I only wish't I was more of me," with a wolsish grin as he turned toward the exit. "Still, you may hear the band begin to play for the circus to open party soon, ef ye keeps all ears open, boss!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

MORE WORK FOR THE CHERUB.

AFTER leaving the presence of Isham Waller and his daughter, Curly Kid retraced his steps to the hotel where he had so adroitly basiled the curiosity-seekers, and locking the door of his chamber, tumbled into bed and fell asleep as though he meant to fully make up for lost time.

It was high noon before he awoke, and after a wash and a robing, he sought the dining-room once more, there to dispose of a meal to fairly match the one he had so successfully "wrastled with" earlier in the day.

Then, with a fairly good cigar between his teeth, the Cheyenne Sport left the hotel and strolled leisurely down the street, heading toward the building which had been transformed into a city jail for the benefit of Jack Lawson and company.

He had scarcely left the hotel before Curly Kid saw that curiosity in his movements had not yet died away, and before he had passed a hundred yards away from that veranda, he had quite a little following, with more coming from nearly every side.

Nothing whatever in face or actions betokened annoyance or chagrin at this display of curiosity, though one far less keen of sight and wit would have found slight difficulty in discovering that all near were not friends. More than one subdued hoot and jeer came to the ears of the Cherub before he came in sight of the guarded jail.

Curly Kid asked Paul Gordon how his wards were faring, receiving the answer with a careless good-nature which only added to the strong, if sudden, liking the veteran had taken to him.

As a proof of that liking, Gordon let fall a whispered caution.

"All the fools bain't dead yit, pardner, an' thar's some as totes mighty long teeth atwixt thar jaws—jes' so!"

Curly Kid turned a lazy, careless glance upon the little crowd now partly filling that portion of the street before answering:

"And you reckon they'd like to sharpen those teeth upon my poor bones, Mr. Gordon?"

"Mebbe yes, mebbe not, but you cain't do yourself no great hurt ef ye sort o' keep your peepers plum' skinned, an'—ef you was to feel too dug-gun tired to do much ramblin' around, boss, why—"

"Would life really be worth living if I had to take so much trouble as all that amounts to, dear sir?"

Curly Kid turned away as he spoke, his words and manner being those of a man who, conscious of having done nothing to merit foul treatment, has little apprehension of harm or real danger coming his way; but before he had covered two-score yards from the friendly veteran, he was given a positive proof of Gordon's shrewd foresight.

In turning the corner, meaning to go back to his hotel, Cummings was rudely jostled by a huge, hulking fellow who ripped out a savage oath and made a vicious stroke at the Cherub as they both turned sharply.

It all happened so suddenly that Curly was very nearly caught off his guard, and only for his really marvelous activity, he must have gone down before that ponderous fist, stunned if not completely knocked out of time.

As it was, his swift swaying aside with head and neck only partially foiled the stroke, those horny knuckles tearing a bit of skin away from the Cherub's cheekbone as the tight-clinched fist swept by.

As Curly Kid flung up an arm to ward off that blow, he brought his other member into swift action, striking with open hand, but so forcibly that the contact produced a report almost equal to that of a pistol, and those sinewy fingers left their signature in red upon the big bully's cheek.

With marvelous rapidity the Cherub repeated that stroke, marking the other cheek with the same symbols, then sprung back out of reach of those massive arms, laughing lightly as he stood with hands on hips, in close proximity to his guns.

"Steady, clumsy!" he cried at the same instant. "Must I lend you yet another prop, or—"

He broke off abruptly at that point, for he saw at least half a dozen pistols coming forth for use, and in that instant he recognized the truth: a truth put into shape by a voice from the crowd, just then:

"A put-up job! Look out, pardner!"

Hesitation then would almost surely have meant his death at one or more of those only too willing weapons; but Curly Kid could both think and act swiftly, and instead of trying to dodge shots or draw a weapon in self-defense, he flung up his hands as he cried out:

"Flag of truce, or shoot like cowards!"

The big bully, Tom Kirk by name, seemed fairly stunned by those stinging slaps, coming just when he calculated upon a swift and easy victory; but now he rallied, jerking forth a revolver and viciously cursing the man who had so adroitly branded him.

It was a truly perilous situation, and Curly Kid apparently had not a ghost of a chance to escape from it with life; but he took the only chance left open, and made the most of it.

He saw that he was covered from all sides by ready guns, and that he could not more than clutch at a weapon before those weapons would surely ring forth his death-knell.

At the same time he felt that all present could hardly be enemies, and trusting in a degree to the manhood of those honest ones, he made his instant choice.

Folding arms over his swelling chest he boldly faced Tom Kirk as he clearly called forth:

"Shoot, you big bully! Shoot, the rest of you curs! And after you have shot down an unarmed man, the honest portion of Crystal City will clean you all out!"

It was a bold bluff, but nothing less daring could have hindered or even delayed that planned assassination.

The natural expectation was that, on being so brutally assaulted on pretext of giving insult by needless jostling, Curly Kid would pull a gun to defend himself, and then he would be shot down by the gang, who would put in a plea of self-defense.

In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the dastardly scheme would have worked pre-

cisely as planned, but the keen wits and marvelous quickness of this stranger Sport foiled their evil plans.

In such cases hesitation nearly always means failure, and having been surprised into holding their fire for the moment, each one of those in the plot seemed waiting for one of the others to begin the fight.

Even Kirk was taken aback, and though he had his pistol out and the muzzle bearing full upon that bosom, he failed to pull trigger, and Curly Kid had time to give another blow.

"You're plenty big enough to eat me, stranger, and that without pepper or salt by way of savor, but—are you a coward clean through?"

"Ye lie like a houn' dog ef ye even dast to think it that way!"

Kirk turned red in the face as he fairly howled back this defiance, but from nearer the prison which held the road-agents there came a stern cry of warning:

"Play fair, dug-gun ye all! Give the stranger a show fer his white alley, or billy-be-blamed all over ef I don't—Stiddy, Tom Kirk!"

The big fellow gave a fierce growl of rage at this interruption, but as he turned head for a look in that direction, he saw a tall, gaunt figure covering him with a Winchester repeater!

Curly Kid saw the same thing, and a bright smile came into his comely visage as he realized that his faith had not been wholly without foundation in fact.

"That's all right, Gordon," he called out, cheerily, flinging up a hand to lend emphasis to his words. "Never mind this whelp, just so long as you stand off his mates until I can—Steady, all hands!"

A sudden change came into his voice, just then, and before his enemies could take any more decided step, Curly Kid once more addressed the big tough, each word sounding clear cut and business-like

"If you're not the dirty cur your actions so far would seem to prove, sir, make it evident by showing your sand! Come at me white fashion, man to man, and I can wipe the earth up with you!"

"I'll kill you like a cussed—"

"You'll be killed like a dog as you merit, if you try to pull trigger before getting the word," quickly cut in the Cherub, throwing away no chances now that he was sure of at least one honest backer. "Gordon has you lined, and—"

"An' the Ole Boy'll hev yer wu'thless soul ef ye don't play fair!" came the stern warning from the veteran. "Man to man the stranger kin flax ye out so dum quick ye'll never know it 'thout some o' yer crooked pards tell ye just what's fell all over ye!"

"You can see it for yourself, stranger," coolly added the Cheyenne Sport, smiling quizzically into that ugly visage, now, so full of mingled doubts, fears, and vicious hatred. "You had it all your own way at the send off, but you let the chance slip through your fingers, and now—well, instead of simply murdering me, you've got to kill me fairly and squarely if at all!"

"I kin do it ef ye only—"

"Stand up with eyes shut and hands behind my back while you take rest on a rock for a pot-shot, eh?" mockingly cried the Cherub. "Bah, you overgrown lump of cowardly rascality! I'd ought to lay you out for the worms, but—beg my pardon on your knees, you cur, or I'll turn you toes up to the daisies!"

"Durn ye! I'll kill you like I would a snake!" hoarsely cried the badgered bully, fairly beside himself with rage, yet afraid to make full use of the revolver he still gripped in his right hand.

"You're wild, stranger! Now there are honest men saying I can have a fair shake, I can make you eat dirt on your marrow-bones, and own me your master at your own best game!" cried Cummings, giving a swift kick which disarmed the bully, then slapping him twice in the face with open palms.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHIEF AS WELL AS CHERUB.

WINDING up with a vigorous tweak and twist of that bulbous nose, Curly Kid sprung back with a mocking laugh, once more sounding his odd slogan:

"I'm Curly Kid, the Cherub from Cheyenne! Not one of a litter, but born on purpose!"

That revolver had been sent flying through the air by a surely-aimed kick that barked knuckles and benumbed fingers for the moment, and almost before he could realize aught was going wrong, Tom Kirk bore that triple brand of degradation.

A hoarse, inarticulate cry burst from his lungs as he rallied, but only to find himself glaring straight into the open muzzles of a brace of revolvers, over which came the swift challenge:

"Steady, you hulking brute, or I'll make cold meat of you!"

Wild with rage the big fellow glared around in expectation of help from his friends, but there the situation had changed, as well.

Like he who had been elected chief actor in that dastardly scheme, they had delayed too long, and now Curly Kid had fully as many stout backers as he had enemies on deck.

Among these were Paul Gordon and Asa Conway, each of whom stood armed and ready to see that the stranger within their gates was given at least a fair show for his life.

Tom Kirk realized that he must shift his tactics to suit, and in deep, vicious tones he cried out:

"Gi' me half a chance, durn ye, an' I'll mop the earth up with ye!"

"Now, you know you're lying, pardner," tauntingly answered the Cherub. "You know that I'm a better man in every respect than you ever dreamed of being. You know—"

"That you're a blamed liar!"

An instant change came over the man from Cheyenne at that vicious interruption, and lowering his pistols, he spoke in clear, stern tones which left no room for misunderstanding:

"No man ever called me a liar, sir, without eating his words or proving them the gospel truth. I say that I am a better man than your mother's whelp ever dared to claim, and you deny my truth. Now—business, you hulking cur!—business in a minute!

"Pick your fashion; name your specialty, and I'll not only meet you on the dead level, but I'll promise to prove you the liar you have just dared call me."

"That's clean, white talk, an' ef he don't come to the scratch after them, then Crystal City hain't no longer the place fer Tom Kirk to do his rootin' in—no, she hain't, now!"

This from doughty Paul Gordon, and that the worthy veteran only expressed the views entertained by a goodly portion of that interested assembly, the cheer which followed gave ample proof.

The bully glared from side to side, reminding one of a coyote-baited bison bull; but he was not all cur, and soon jumped at the chance those words seemed to afford him.

"You'll gi' me a show, then, durn ye?" he huskily spoke, eyes coming back to that pale, cold, hard-set face once more.

"Ask for it, you whelp of Satan!"

"Putt off yer guns, then, an' I'll hammer ye clean down to China!"

Quick as a cat in action Curly Kid sprung back far enough to drop his pistols together with the belt which had given them support at the feet of Asa Conway, then came back once more with the words upon his lips:

"Strip, you brute! Give your guns to one of your friends, and then see which one is the liar: I, or yourself! Strip, or—shall I yank the rigging off of ye, then?"

The prospect of getting out of an ugly scrape so cheaply, with all the odds looking to be in his own favor, served to give the big bravo back his usual nerve, and showing his teeth in a surly grin he said:

"Yah! Ye'r in a durn sight bigger hurry now then you'll be after a weenty bit, Kid! I'll do the stripin', an' ef that's a patch o' clean hide left onto ye big 'nough fer to wad a 'tatur pop-gun when I git through—waugh-hoof!"

All hands seemed wild with anticipation, now, and a ring was formed as by magic, into which Paul Gordon slipped with a friendly warning hot on the tip of his tongue.

"Tain't a holy picnic you've ketched,

but you kin do him up ef ye keep cool an' make it out-fightin'. Don't let him come to locks, though, fer he's a holy terror fer-chuh!"

"That's all right, pardner," coldly cut in the Cherub as he stripped to trowsers and shirt, then rolled up the sleeves of the latter garment. "I said I could best him at any and everything. If I can't do just that, I'm the liar he called me, and am willing to sup my gruel. Now—just keep any others from chipping into the game, and I'll take care of this 'scape-gallows!"

Tom Kirk had been somewhat similarly employed during the brief interval, and now turned to face his adversary, stripped to the waist, his hairy chest showing great muscular development, while his great arms seemed actually overburdened with muscle.

"Git through with yer prayin', critter!" he called out, boastingly, as he ran a depreciating glance up and down that trim, shapely form. "Hyar I be, ready for to—"

He never finished that sentence, for Curly Kid leaped forward in a cyclone rush, striking straight from the shoulder and with cruel force, blood flying in a mist-like rain as that shaggy head was beaten back—back—its owner saved from falling only by awkward floundering.

Blow after blow went straight to the mark, now over, now under those awkwardly flourishing arms, but never a one of them all but what made full connection, leaving a sign of that contact written in red!

Once or twice the Cherub had to duck or dodge swiftly to foil a ponderous stroke, but those occasions were seldom in comparison with his own surely planted blows.

Once or twice he had to force an opening to that bleeding face, but a single arm sufficed for that, and his other fist merely struck twice instead of once.

Those first blows fairly blinded the big fellow, and after that he was little better than a chopping-block in those skilled hands.

Here and there he was driven by those pitiless blows which never ceased falling during that first minute, cutting and gashing the puffy flesh almost as they might have done with artificial knuckles of brass or of steel.

It was a brutal exhibition enough, yet one that thrilled the very marrow of those who witnessed it. Never before had they seen such a human cyclone, never before dreamed that living man could make such an exhibition of pure skill against brute strength!

"Jump in on him, Tom!" cried out one of the big fellow's friends, as soon as surprise would permit the words to shape themselves.

"Close in and break his back, man!"

Whether or no Kirk heard and comprehended that cry, he made a blind and blundering rush for his too-skillful antagonist: a rush which Curly Kid might have evaded just as he had others which preceded it; but in place of dodging, he himself rushed to a close, grappling with the giant as though nothing on earth could please him better.

A brief struggle, then the big fellow was wrenched off his feet, turned half over in the air as he was swung around the Cherub's hip, to fall with a crushing force on head and shoulders an instant later.

A beautiful cross-buttock, indeed!

The huge hulk lay in a shivering heap, more dead than alive, but the Cherub never wasted so much as a single glance in that direction.

He leaped back far enough to catch the weapons he had voluntarily laid aside a brief space before, cocking the revolvers and sweeping muzzles over the amazed ring as he sternly cried out:

"Who comes next? Now I've fairly got my hand in, I'll make it a thorough clean-up, but—come at me white! Face me like men, not like curs as you did a while ago, for—by the living gods! I'll kill the next dog that dares to snarl or snap at my heels!"

And he looked just as though he meant every word he uttered, too!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LUCKY DICKSON TALKS BUSINESS.

It is truly wonderful how swiftly a certain class of news will spread, seemingly borne by the air itself, and the rumor of an impending battle between chiefs reached the bank building in time to draw Nathan Man-

ning to the scene of that brief but bloody affair.

Whether he meant those stern, menacing words for the banker or not, Curly Kid held one of his revolvers in line with Manning's brain, and he looked so dangerous that the junior partner actually flinched and turned away without a word for himself.

As he turned, Manning caught sight of Lucky Dickson, standing just outside the ring, only a few feet away from where he was, and making a swift sign which he knew the gambler could not mistake, he only paused when fairly clear of that gathering.

He saw that none of those present cared to pick up the gauntlet flung down so boldly by the Cherub, although there were more than one present who would have drawn breath far more freely if Curly Kid had lost, instead of winning—if in losing he had lost his life.

The Cherub stood there, the picture of grim defiance, for a brief space, then gave a laugh of mingled scorn and mockery as he lowered his guns with a parting shot from the tip of his tongue:

"That's all right if you only think so, gentlemen! I reckon I can stand it if you can. But, don't say I never gave fair warning, for I have, and I mean every word I spoke. I'll kill without wasting time in warning after this; so cut your cloth accordingly, all!"

Nathan Manning only waited for this, and to see that the bold Sport had none to accept his challenge as he turned away to don his outer garments.

Passing around the corner of the building near which he had halted, the portly banker greeted the gambler with an ominous frown as Dickson came up in response to that signal.

"Where have you been all this time? What have you been doing?" he demanded, both tone and looks better demeaning a master than an equal:

Dickson shrugged his shoulders, lip curling a bit, but made answer in friendly enough tones:

"I've been doing work for you, old man, of course. That's come to be a sort of standing answer of late, hasn't it, now?"

"Doing my work?" asked Manning, lowering his tones and drawing a little nearer. "Not—you mean—just what?"

"About this Captain Clean-up affair, of course. What else would I be troubling myself over, just now?"

"And, where is he?"

Manning seemed to find it no easy task to hit upon the exact words to best fit his meaning without saying too much; but the gambler, fully as quick-witted, gave a brief nod of comprehension.

"Name me no names, pardner, until we're where talk comes easier and safer," he said, with a warning glance around them, then moving as though in haste to quit that too-exposed location.

Little wonder; for just then Paul Gordon proposed a cheer for the Cheyenne Cherub, which was given with such hearty good will that both of these schemers scowled instinctively as they moved away.

They held naught in sympathy with the victor who was thus being crowned as chief, and both seemed to breathe more freely when they had placed a few more rods of space between themselves and Curly Kid.

Once again Manning essayed to learn the truth, but Dickson seemed inclined to fight shy.

"This isn't a place fit to do or to talk business in, pardner," he almost gruffly muttered. "Where shall we go? to your rooms, or to my little den?"

"To my rooms, if you insist upon it, of course. But, all's safe? Surely you can say that much, Lucky?"

"It's safe if you care to make it safe," enigmatically replied the gambler, then fastlocked his teeth again.

Knowing through past experience that his ally was better to lead than to drive, Nathan hurried on to his private rooms, neither man speaking again until they were behind locked doors, seated at a neat little table upon which the banker had placed cigars, liquor and glasses.

"Now then, Dickson, out with it!" he said, sternly, leaning forward in his chair with glowing gaze riveted upon the gam-

bler's face, as though he meant to read the truth as it was written there.

"You're ready to talk business, then, are you?"

"Of course I am!" But you—where is Martin Castle?"

"Safe enough for the present, pardner!"

"Then you didn't—he isn't dead?" asked the banker, with evident disappointment.

"No, he isn't dead; and whether he croaks at all depends pretty much upon your say-so, Manning," coolly answered the gambler, half closing his lids as he gazed at his host through a curl of tobacco smoke.

"Haven't I already given my say-so? And haven't you already agreed to make all sure by—eh?" ending the sentence with a significant gesture.

"That's all right, pardner, but the market for cold meat has changed since then, and now I'm here to talk pure business, Manning, and you've got to meet me on my own level or—"

"Finish your threat, Dickson!"

"Call it statement of fact, pardner; that has a more friendly sound. And we can't well afford to quarrel, you and I, old man; now, can we?"

"Make it pure business, Dickson, and let empty chaff go for the present," coldly retorted the banker. "What is it you expect of me, more than I have already promised to pay you for turning this trick?"

"Merely enough to cover the added risk, pardner. You can't help but see how nastily affairs have altered for the worse since our bargain was made; so you must pay me enough to make it well worth my while, or off I scoot to hedge my little book!"

"What do you call worth while?" asked the banker, keenly watching the brown but shapely hand that rested upon the table between them, and a finger of which was slowly forming figures.

Dickson looked up with a smile, nodding his head as he caught the eyes of his opposite.

"Do you mean it, Lucky? That is your price, then?" slowly asked Manning. "But, how am I to know that you'll keep faith with me now, any more than you have kept faith so far?"

"That's all right, pardner, and I'll give you a square deal. All I ask for is fair pay for dirty work. If you give that, I'll do my share up to the queen's taste. If not—but, time enough for threatening after you kick over the traces, eh, Manning?"

"Which means that you'd go back on me in sober earnest if I kicked about paying your raised terms, Dickson?"

"Well, you might call it something like that, pardner. Fact is just like this: no matter how we end up this part of the job, there's bound to be such a nasty row kicked up that my business would be spoiled in this section for all time. And so, if I can't quit the game with a stake big enough to open up in good style elsewhere, through serving you, then I'll sell out to Castle and let you two fellows fight it out, cat fashion!"

The gambler spoke with cool nerve, though one less reckless might well have flinched from that glowing pair of eyes. He knew that he held all the trump cards, and Manning was just as wise.

"If I decide to accept your latest terms, Dickson, I shall expect proof positive that you have earned your money before I pay it over."

"That's fair enough, and I'd have said the same thing if you hadn't got at it ahead of my tongue," frankly declared the gambler.

"Where is Castle, then?"

"That's all right, pardner, and you'll know in good time. Promise to meet my terms, and I'll show him to you: this very night for choice!"

Manning bowed his head in thought for a minute or two, then answered:

"Very well, Dickson. This night let it be, then, unless—unless I should decide to throw up the game altogether! So, come for me at dusk; I'll give you a definite answer then."

CHAPTER XXIX.

LIFE AND LIBERTY FOR DISHONOR.

It was still early twilight when Nathan Manning quietly left his customary haunts

and passed through the town, just outside of which he was joined by Luke Dickson, the gambler.

With the appearance of friends casually met, the two schemers stood as if idly chatting for a minute or so, keenly if covertly making the best possible use of their eyes.

There was nothing to show that their movements had awakened curiosity, and no signs of their being watched by friends or by foeman.

Satisfied on this point, Manning spoke more to the point:

"All's ready, then, Dickson? You've got the horses?"

"Ready and waiting, pardner; come on!"

The gambler led the way to where a couple of horses were tethered, and, mounting, the confederates turned their backs squarely upon Crystal City, heading for the hills.

By this time the shades of evening had fallen sufficiently to lend them friendly cover, and feeling no fear of detection, now they had fairly cleared the town, the two struck immediately into the regular stage road, riding in the direction of Hoodoo Gulch.

They made rapid progress so long as they stuck to the traveled road, talking but little the while, but after abandoning that road and getting deeper into the hills, their progress was little better than a foot-pace.

More than once the portly banker, whose forte could hardly be called rough-riding, broke forth in surly growls and sounding curses.

"Now, in the name of the foul fiend, did you ever come to think of such an infernal place, anyway, Dickson?" he asked, after an uncommonly difficult bit of scrambling.

The gambler merely laughed for reply, but his hidden face bore an expression of impish glee as he rode on, Wa he purposely selecting these bits of roughness especially for the banker's benefit?

There were not many sentences exchanged by the confederates during that night ride, but what was uttered made it perfectly clear that Nathan Manning must have agreed to accept the terms offered him by Lucky Dickson, more especially as the latter was leading the way directly for the spot where he had conveyed the Crystal City Sport, a captive.

"Here we are, at last!" declared Dickson, as he drew rein and sprung out of the saddle. "Tumble down, old man: we're at the half-way house."

"Time enough, too," surlily answered the portly partner as he followed the example thus set before him. "Now, where is he?"

"Waiting to receive your fatherly benediction, of course!" declared Luke, with a brief chuckle, as he tethered the animals, then headed for the little cavern. "Come! Keep close to my heels, and don't hold your blessed head so high, else you might catch more bumps than phrenologist ever run up against in his wildest dreams!"

Lucky Dickson appeared to be in an unusually electric mood just then, but Manning was hardly himself either, and certainly was not critical enough to find fault, or even marvel at that queer mood.

Together the schemers entered the little cavern, where the banker stood motionless, in obedience to a muttered warning, until the glow of a little fire kindled by Dickson enabled him to discern surrounding objects.

Not far from where the fire had been started lay a human figure on its back, with face upturned and looking strangely deathlike there in that ghostly light!

Nathan Manning instantly recognized that face, dim though the light was as yet, and with his heart giving a mighty leap he moved forward and bent over that figure, hoping to find it a corpse indeed!

Instead, he met the eyes of a living man, gagged beyond the power of speech, bound so that escape was impossible, and movement well nigh so.

Those eyes flashed forth a fierce hatred and defiance as the banker gave a low ejaculation and slightly recoiled; but then their lids lowered and moved not, as Lucky Dickson came forward with a short, heartless laugh.

"Pretty well cowed, isn't he, pardner? Never thought to see him so mild and harm-

less while life lasted, did you? Well, that's part of my patent, and—steady, dear boy!"

While speaking thus the gambler bent over to remove that gag, but drawing back without touching the other bonds.

"There's your game, boss," he said, with a slight gesture toward the prisoner as he drew aside. "I've done my part so far, now do yours!"

Having swiftly conquered what emotion that sight had caused him, Manning stepped close to the side of that painfully gasping man, never a gleam of pity or of mercy in face or tones as he spoke, slowly:

"I didn't come here to do much talking, Martin Castle, but what little I have to say you had better give heed to. Can you hear me? Can you understand what I am saying?"

"Kill me, you devils!" huskily gasped the imprisoned Sport, shivering violently, either in pain or in mental agony. "Don't make me—put me out of my misery at once if ye be anything like men! Don't—don't torture me like—devils—devils all!"

Manning certainly was not prepared for such a change in the so recently dauntless Sport, and looked toward Dickson for an explanation.

The gambler smiled grimly as he gave a nod, then said:

"Just part of my patent, I told you, pardner! You asked where I'd been and what doing; now see for yourself!"

There was more in his manner than in his words, and the banker turned again to the prisoner, believing he had caught the clue to that marvelous alteration. Upon his face was a vicious smile, and never a gleam of pity helped his eyes to that unusual brightness as he squatted on his heels by the side of the helpless Sport, coldly speaking:

"Whether or no we kill you, Martin Castle, depends mainly upon yourself. If you act sensibly, you may yet live to wear gray hairs, but if not—good-by, John!

"First, before giving you the privilege of choosing life or death, Castle, listen to what I've come all this way to tell you: that you now stand branded as Captain Clean-up in the sight of all Crystal City!"

"I never— You know that's all a lie!" huskily cried the Sport, with a flash of his old-time courage.

"You might swear your innocence from now until the crack of doom, Martin Castle, yet never change the opinion of a single person among the host you once called friends! And, mark it well, my friend: One of those who now most firmly believe in your guilt is Marion Waller!"

"No, no, not—not that!" panted the wretched being, his lips closing and his form shivering as with a sudden chill.

"Just that, Martin Castle! If you were to rush into her presence right now, pleading your suit, vowing your innocence, Marion Waller would spurn you with loathing far too great for words! I swear it, and I have just come from them both: from Marion and her father."

Only a groan from the tortured Sport, and with his face full of poorly veiled malignancy, Nathan Manning spoke on.

"Now I am ready to state the alternative of which I spoke a bit ago, Castle, so pay close attention. For, if you refuse to accept this offer, your fate is sealed past redemption!

"I will spare your life. I will let you go free from here, without harm or hindrance. I will give you money enough to make a fair start in a new life, and will pledge you my word of honor to transfer your bank account to any other institution you may name. Is this the offer of a miser, think, Martin Castle?"

"Unless— What am I to do for it all?"

"Comparatively nothing when you bear in mind just how you are situated; less than nothing when you remember that refusal means certain death!" prefaced the tempter, then adding:

"I have here a written admission that you are Captain Clean-up, and that you have been the sole head and front of all robberies and outrages committed under that title. Sign this and—"

"Never, you devil!" fiercely cried the Crystal City Sport, as he struggled desperately against his bonds.

"It is sign or die, remember!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PRICE OF A MAN'S LIFE.

STERNLY spoke the banker, but even more fiercely answered his victim.

"I'll die, then! But, I'll die like a white man!"

Martin Castle ceased struggling against his bonds, for they had been applied by a careful hand, and long ere this he had thoroughly tested their efficacy.

He lay panting, looking up into the face of his merciless enemy as Manning slowly drew his portly form erect. And as he looked down into those dauntless eyes, the schemer knew he would only be wasting his time if he made further effort to alter that stern resolution.

He might break, but he could never bend that brave and sturdy will.

Still, it was hard to abandon the plans so long and carefully studied out, and trying to disguise his actual eagerness for a favorable answer, Nathan Manning spoke once more:

"Better think twice of it, Castle! You're young to die, now, and your hopes of ever winning Marion Waller to wife are forever blasted. So why not have the game as well as the name? Sign this confession—"

"Never, you cowardly devil—never!"

With a shrug of his broad shoulders the banker turned away from the bound man, giving a slight nod as he met Dickson's eyes.

The gambler drew apart with him sufficiently far for their lowered tones not to reach the ears of their victim, then Manning said:

"I was a fool for thinking it, perhaps, but now I've given it over; the fellow must croak, Dickson!"

The gambler gave a nod.

"I know that! I thought I had broken down his will far enough to make him not only accept but even thank you for such an offer, but he's made of tougher stuff than I gave him credit for."

Nathan stood in silence for a few moments, then spoke in even harsher tones than before.

"After all, I reckon it's best this way. He'd make a mighty tough subject if he was to break his oath after giving it. And so—yes! He must croak, Lucky!"

"All right, pardner; croak it is. Pay me for the wear and tear on my poor conscience, Manning, and I'll shut off his wind mighty quick!"

"How much?"

"Just a neat little five thousand, of course!" came the ready response. "Didn't I name my figures when you asked me, back town-way?"

"I know you did, only, it's too much money!"

"It's bed-rock prices, old man, and though I reckon I'd do more for you than any other man living, I'll never come down a single notch; that's flat!"

Dickson spoke in subdued tones, but there was no room left for doubting his earnestness.

Manning flung forth a hand impatiently. His eyes glowed in that dim light, and he spoke like one strongly irritated:

"I can work cheaper than that myself, man! Rather than pay you so large an amount as that, I'd snuff out his light as I might a candle!"

"Don't forget one thing, please, pardner," quietly urged the gambler.

"Don't forget what thing?"

"That this is my meat, and that you can't even begin to touch it without my full and free consent. Sabe, that pardner?"

"You surely can't mean—"

"I surely do mean just this: I'll 'croak' Martin Castle if you pay me the right price. If you refuse to pay—well, no pay no meat!"

As Dickson said this, he stepped so as to stand between the prisoner and the banker, at the same time drawing a revolver from his belt with careless grace!

That action supplied what words left open, and Martin turned several shades paler as their eyes met.

"You're going back on me, Lucky?"

"Not unless you make me go back, Nathan," came the ready response. "As I said, I'd do more for you than I would for any other fellow on the Big Footstool this minute, but, business is business!"

"But this is not business, man; it's extortion—rank extortion!"

"Now you're growing foolish, man," retorted the gambler, armed hand resting on a hip, yet still gripping the weapon he knew so well how to use. "And if you'll only listen a bit, I'll prove you foolish!"

"But, five thousand—"

"Is little enough price, all things considered. Manning. Just run over in your mind all I have done for you since you first hatched up this Captain Clean-up affair!"

"For which you paid yourself out of the plunder taken, man!"

"To whack up with the boys, which left mighty little for my share. But, that don't count. You pocketed all the money lost by the bank, and will still be ahead of the game after paying my little bill."

"Then, too, remember that this payment will cover all. Hand it over, wipe off the slate and start a new score. Not with me, though, for I'm going to rack out in a hurry just as soon as— Out with it, man! Will you pay me the price I ask for the life of Martin Castle?"

"I haven't so much with me, and—"

"You have it at the bank, haven't you?" interrupted the gambler, determined to have an answer as briefly as might be. "Then pledge me your word of honor that you'll pay me off this night, as soon as we can get back to town; will you do it, Manning?"

"And if I agree?" hesitatingly asked the banker, with a furtive glance toward yonder bound and helpless figure.

"I'll send Martin Castle over the range jest a whooping."

Despite his strong nerves, the banker shivered at this callousness, and muttering something about the lack of fresh air, he hurried from the cave, followed closely by the gambler.

"Give me the word, pardner, for I'm wearing the bark off my tongue with so much talking. Shall I croak the gentleman, then, on those terms and conditions?"

"How'll you do it, Dickson?" muttered the banker, brushing a hand across his brow.

The gambler drew his pistol, lifting the hammer off the safety-notch and twirling the cylinder around upon a palm as he said:

"With this, of course. Will you come and play witness, Manning?"

"No!" with a perceptible shudder. "Go and get it over with, man!"

Laughing softly like one rarely amused, the desperado turned and re-entered the cave, leaving his employer standing outside, head bent in breathless listening.

His patience was not greatly tasked, though each second seemed a little age. There sounded a muffled report, and, ten seconds later Lucky Dickson came hastily through that entrance, speaking hoarsely:

"Come! It's done, and—come on, man! I want my pay, so I can rack out of this in a holy hurry—I just do, now!"

But Manning caught an arm and almost sternly demanded:

"You made sure work of it, Dickson? You didn't—he's dead, past all doubting, then?"

"Too mighty dead for skinning, and—"

Nathan drew a long breath, but maintained that grip in spite of the effort made by the gambler to shake his hand off.

"All right, Lucky, but there's far too much at stake for me to take all for granted when—"

"What more can you ask, confound you, Manning?"

"Just to see for myself that your work is thoroughly done," sternly answered the banker. "Come and show me, or—"

"All right, my suspicious covey!" recklessly cried the gambler, once more turning toward the cavern. "Come and satisfy yourself, then I want my pay. Satan knows I've fully earned it all!"

Entering the cavern, they gained the side of that silent figure, and by the firelight Manning saw a mask of blood and—ugh!

"Do you want to feel of the hole to make sure?" asked Dickson, with an almost vicious sneer. "Use your finger as a probe, then, and—ha! ha!"

He broke into a mocking laugh as the banker shrank away, shuddering.

CHAPTER XXXI.

NO HONOR AMONG THIEVES.

"If he was alive, there'd be some sense in your shrinking, Nathan, but now the veriest cur ever whelped might snap and snarl and nip his heels without so much as—"

Manning shrank away from the gambler's hand, as though he feared Dickson meant to force him to that grim experiment.

"No! I'll not—I've seen enough!" he muttered as he started toward the exit.

"Then you're satisfied, pardner? You're no longer afraid of my playing you crooked?" persisted Dickson in half-mocking, half-menacing tones. "Better make assurance doubly certain, Manning, and so—here's my gun: you can't well spoil that handsome face, now!"

With an oath the banker struck down the hand that offered him the weapon, then made all possible haste to leave that horrible sight behind him.

Still chuckling like one hugely enjoying this angry fright, Lucky Dickson trod close upon the other's heels, both pausing only when they came to the place where their horses had been left tethered.

Once out in the open air, away from that hideously altered face, Manning quickly rallied his shaken nerves, and when the gambler would have continued his grim pleasantries he sternly cut them short.

"No more, I say! Come, or I'll leave you to make the return trip alone!" he said, climbing into the saddle like one in haste to be off.

"That's a mighty sight more than I'll let you do, though, my hearty!" assured the desperado, springing upon his horse and keeping close to the banker. "I've done my work and now I'll stick to you closer than your shirt until I see the color of my wages!"

The return trip was made in less time than had been consumed by the first part of that night ride, for now Dickson had but one aim left him: to secure his price as speedily as possible.

Very few words passed between the two, and Dickson was never more fully upon the alert than while threading that intricate trail; he kept one hand upon a pistol-butt, and hardly a moment passed that his keenly suspicious eyes were not upon his present companion.

Now that his foul work was done, and he was expecting his reward, might not Nathan Manning try to pay him off in lead rather than in gold or printed paper?

Whether or no this unusual degree of caution had aught to do with it, the fact remains that the two men reached town without any such "accident" taking place; and leaving their horses at the place where they had first taken saddle, they quietly passed into town and headed direct for the bank in which Nathan Manning was a junior partner.

The hour was late, and quiet reigned throughout the town. Here and there a light was burning. Now and then a distant voice was heard, coming from some one of the "all-night" places, but, thanks to their thorough knowledge of the place, the confederates reached the bank building without encountering a single person by the way.

No difficulty was experienced in effecting an entrance for, as a matter of course, Manning carried the necessary keys; and as Lucky Dickson saw fit to ignore the gentle hint let fall that he might wait on the outside for Manning's return, the two entered the building.

Manning struck a match and lit one of the kerosene lamps with which the bank was fitted, then turned to the massive, built-in safe which served to protect the bank's funds, quickly opening its heavy door.

When this was done, and the gambler caught sight of the money thus exposed, he struck with clubbed revolver at that bent head, knocking Nathan forward inside the door, then falling upon him, as he cried out to his hidden confederates:

"Come, lads! Make all haste, for—Steady, you big sucker!"

Two oddly matched men sprung forth from beneath the counter where they had lain in wait, and with the aid of Lucky Dickson quickly had the banker bound and helpless, at least for the moment.

Dickson himself wound a muffler about

the lower face of his betrayed employer, laughing viciously as he drew back a bit, the better to enjoy his triumph.

That heavy blow had only partially stunned the banker, and now he was fully revived, life coming back all the swifter because he saw how thoroughly he had been deceived.

"Make a clean sweep of all that's worth taking, boys!" Dickson ordered, but without offering to assist the couple, just then. "It's our last chance for bleeding the old gent, and we want to make it count—eh, Manning?"

He laughed again as he met that fierce but impotent glare, and while his pals—Dan Wheatley and Tom Kirk—plundered the safe, he mocked his no less evil dupe with words, looks and actions.

"Did you reckon I was going to play dog to you for all time, Nathan Manning?" he demanded, showing his teeth in vicious triumph as he stood before the impotent banker. "Bah! You took every one else for fools, and by so doing branded yourself the biggest ass of the entire drove!

"If you hadn't been next door to an idiot, Nathan, would you have saved us all this trouble, by opening the safe? I told you honestly enough that this was to be my last stroke of work, for Crystal City was growing too infernally hot for my constitution! And yet, you even invite me in here to witness a full display of your wealth: yours, and the old gentleman, your partner!

"I feel half-way sorry for him, since he's white: too mighty white for so black a running mate as you, Nathan Manning! Still, we can't tell his share from yours, and as for expecting you to show us: if we tried that, you'd lie us out of even beer-money!

"Stings you, doesn't it, old fellow. Look mad enough to blast one with your eyes even as you are cursing us in your heart! Yet, one word in kind and friendly warning, old pard!

"Spend the remaining hours of night in hatching up a plausible lie to account for the empty condition of yonder safe when you are found here in the morning. Don't you think to play even by telling the truth, Manning, for nobody will believe you can tell the truth.

"I've got everything arranged for a speedy skip, and all the search you could set on foot wouldn't even begin to touch me. Still, write this down in your memory, Manning, and write it deep!

"Just so sure as you mention our names in connection with this robbery, just so certain will I send back a true account of your connection with the Captain Clean-up business! I'll swear that you alone laid the plans—that you only profited by them!"

Lucky Dickson broke off at this point, and passed over to assist his brace of confederates in rifling the safe.

They rejected all save actual cash, bundling that into stout canvas bags provided for that especial purpose, chuckling in high glee as they made a rough estimate of their plunder.

It amounted to even more than they had counted upon securing, and that by no means lessened the fierce triumph which Lucky Dickson was feeling just then.

When satisfied that no receptacle for cash had been overlooked, he bade his fellows fasten the bags securely to guard against leakage when it came to a rapid flight; then he turned once more toward Manning, who lay as he had been left, awkwardly doubled up near one of the desks.

Taking from his pocket a gage which he had provided for the occasion, the gambler stooped over his dupe in order to replace that muffler with a "sound-reducer" less apt to be ejected, grimly saying:

"It's a bitter dose, I know, pardner, but you've got to take it! Play sensible and suffer less; try to kick, and I may have to spoil your beauty a bit! And that— Ha!"

He gave a start and a cry, but he was too late to save himself!

With a tremendous effort Nathan Manning burst those too hastily applied bonds, and, snatching at the revolver showing at Dickson's hip, he jerked it forth and pulled trigger with savage haste!

The gambler reeled back, to fling up his arms and fall heavily.

Manning partly rose, turning weapon toward the startled thieves, and opened fire as

he yelled for help at the top of his voice! For now he knew that he was fighting for dear life against odds!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE CHERUB STILL ON TOP.

JUST as those pistol-shots rung forth, followed so closely by those wild shouts for help, a little party of men hurried up to the bank building, the one in advance flinging wide the unlocked door, then springing forward to knock down a tall, bulky fellow who was making a rush for the outer air.

At the same time his comrade dropped to the floor with a shrill, rat-like squeal of bodily agony, stricken down by the hand of Nathan Manning himself.

And then, at the same instant, Lucky Dickson rallied far enough to lift himself upon an elbow, his other hand thrusting forward a revolver as he huskily cried out:

"You devil! Come with me, for—come!"

With a sharp cry one of the other men sprung forward to knock that weapon aside, but he was too late to hinder that one shot: and with a scream of pain, the banker fell back against that desk.

Dickson was easily disarmed, for he had been badly wounded at the outset, and at his very best he would have been no match for the man into whose firm grip he had now fallen.

He looked up at that face, to utter a low, choking cry as recognition came.

"You, Martin Castle? Deuce curse—"

"Steady, all!" just then rung forth a clear, commanding voice as the leader rose up from the now helpless form of Big Tom Kirk. "It's taking not slaying we want, but if we have to—then so be it!"

But the victory was already won, and as he glanced swiftly over the bloody scene, Curly Kid Cummings realized as much.

He had barely time in which to take in the various details before sounds from without told him the town had taken alarm at those shots, and hastily bidding his comrades back him up in what was to follow, he prepared to "stand off" the crowd long enough to make them listen to reason, knowing that after once hearing what he had to tell, there would be no great risk of lynching.

Then it was that the popularity he had so bravely won at the peril of his life stood the Cheyenne Cherub in good stead, for hardly another man in all Crystal City could have held that excited crowd in check when the truth was made known, even in part.

But, Curly Kid prevailed, backed up as he was by Martin Castle and Asa Conway from the first, with additions from the more conservative citizens as he spoke on; and before many more minutes passed, those wounded in that brief but hot skirmish were receiving medical attention.

From the very first it was seen that Lucky Dickson had about run his earthly race, and when the gambler, in turn, was told that his shot for revenge had merely given the banker a painful flesh wound, he seemed to lose his nerve, and trembled while sobbing like a frightened baby.

Curly Kid it was who finally reconciled the gambler to what was written, and then, knowing that his very moments were surely numbered, with hand clasped by that honest palm, Luke Dickson made a full and complete confession to Curly Kid, never seeming to see or heed those others who stood by in grave, if intent, listening.

He told how Nathan Manning had tempted him to join the diabolical plot to forever ruin Martin Castle in the eyes of all honest people, and he told how he made up to resemble as nearly as possible, the Crystal City Sport.

They were nearly alike in size and general build, the sole radical difference being one which had, at the first, convinced the Cherub that Martin Castle and Captain Clean-up could not possibly be the same person: Luke Dickson had gray eyes, while those of the Sport were brown!

By adding a false mustache and imperial to his smoothly shorn face, the gambler had been enabled to deceive even Paul Gordon and his mates on the day this record opens.

As the first rays of the morning sun came in through the bank window the life of Lucky Dickson came to an end.

The whole story was not known until

after that death, though, and Martin Castle was the one to prove that Lucky Dickson was just a little less thoroughly vile than his record seemed to show, on its face.

The absence from town which had caused Nathan Manning so much uneasiness, was caused by a ride to that distant cave, where Dickson prepared Castle for what followed: a mock assassination meant to throw the banker wholly off his guard, and the gambler swore to set the Sport at liberty as soon as possible after securing his reward for that supposed assassination.

Very possibly Dickson was dealing double in this instance, as well, but that could never be known now. Martin Castle always gave him credit for having kept his promise then, and no one cared to dispute his belief.

Then Curly Kid had much to explain, which he did to the satisfaction of all concerned, after publicly laying claim to the man who had, for so long, cut a prominent figure in Crystal City and vicinity as Nathan Manning.

That claim was made, under his true name—Horace Cummings, detective, and by virtue of a regularly-issued warrant for the said Nathan Manning on a charge of murder in the first degree.

Suspecting Nathan Manning of being at the bottom of all the trouble then, Curly Kid had kept a close if covert watch over his movements, and in company with Asa Conway he had dogged the two schemers on that long night ride to the cavern where Martin Castle was confined.

They were delayed too much to capture their game [before that shot was fired, although they caught the muffled report.]

They had no certain chance of taking the criminals, even if they had been fully certain their evidence would justify such an arrest; but, as the two men rode off, they stole into the cavern and found Martin Castle alive, though so grimly adorned!

That blood was not his own, and the shot Lucky Dickson fired never touched human flesh.

Removing those bonds, the triad hurried, at their best speed, back to Crystal City, reaching there just in time to hear the shots fired inside the bank building, when they made their rush with the results already given.

Dan Wheatley, between his groans and lamentations over his hopelessly crippled leg—a bullet from the banker's weapon had shattered the rat-like spy's left knee—owned up to the part he had played in the stirring drama; told how he had been paid by Manning to hang around Conway's claim the afternoon Captain Clean-up was to be exposed by the banker, to guard against a false alibi being brought forward to save Martin Castle from the noose of Judge Lynch.

He admitted setting Tom Kirk at the Cherub, the intention being to shoot Cummings down the instant he tried to draw a gun to avenge an insult. No need to recall how that brutal scheme was foiled, however.

After all had been explained, Detective Horace Cummings turned the members already captured over to local justice, with the single exception of Nathan Manning; him he reserved for the gallows, far away toward the rising sun.

More than ever feeling that, though there was "big money" to be made in the banking and brokerage line "out West," he was growing too old to stand "the wear and tear" further, Isham Waller closed up the business and removed to his old Ohio home—Marion and Martin bearing him company.

Shortly after that removal word came back to Crystal City of a quiet but more than usually happy wedding, and many were the hearty cheers sent up for the popular Sport and his beautiful bride!

And what of the detective who so ably and daringly played the part of that wandering adventurer, at Crystal City? He took his prisoner safely back to stand trial and find conviction; then he passed on to other scenes, more than once figuring again as "Curly Kid, the Cherub from Cheyenne! Not one of a litter, but born on purpose!"

THE END.

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